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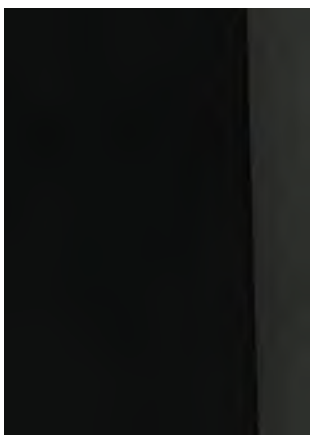
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1. Fiction, Satire

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LITTLE ESSON.

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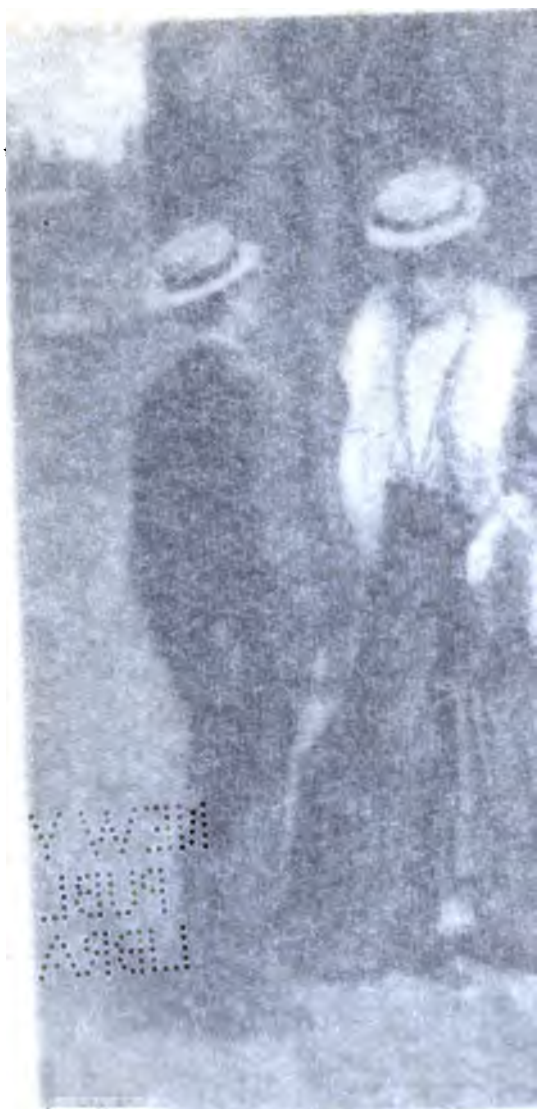
STRONG MAC.
JOAN OF THE SWORD HAND.
THE STICKIT MINISTER.
THE RAIDERS.
THE PLAYACTRESS.
THE LILAC SUNBONNET.
BOG-MYRTLE AND PEAT.
THE MEN OF THE MOSS HAGS.
CLEG KELLY.
THE GREY MAN.
LADS' LOVE.
LOCHINVAR.
THE STANDARD BEARER.
THE RED AXE.
THE BLACK DOUGLAS.
IONE MARCH.
KIT KENNEDY.
FLOWER-O'-THE CORN.
THE FIREBRAND.
THE ADVENTURER IN SPAIN.
THE DARK O' THE MOON.
THE BANNER OF BLUE.
CINDERELLA.
LITTLE ANNA MARK.
THE STICKIT MINISTER'S WOO-
ING.
THE LOVES OF MISS ANNE.
MAID MARGARET.
THE CHERRY RIBBAND.
KID McGHIE.
THE WHITE PLUMES OF
NAVARRE.

SWEETHEART TRAVELLERS.
SIR TOADY LION.





" ' And you dare ask me to marry you ! ' " (P.
Little Eszon..)





LITTLE ESSO

BY
S. R. CROCKETT ^{6c.}

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CHAPTER I.

THE STUDIO.

"I TELL you I will *not*," the girl said, not loudly, but speaking a little hoarsely. "I will *not* go back to him. Never! He has beaten me again. See!"

She held out her arms towards the five men who had been sitting so quietly together in the summer gloaming.

"See," she cried. "My God, see what he has done! Are you blind? Are you dumb? Where is Jerome, my brother? Why is he not here? The coward, the hound! He knew how it would be, and he dared not go home with me!"

And even in the dusk these five men, with strange swellings of the heart, saw before their eyes the girl's white arms barred with dark red stripes, the weals of blows struck in anger. Little Esson turned sick. He had the imagination which sees what has passed to the uttermost detail.

Clad like a princess, she had been posing for

them in her brother's studio all the afternoon. There had been laughter and gladness, as when young folk are together, and one is the beloved of all. And after she had left them, they sat on, something of the fresh glamour of the girl's beauty still clinging about the ramshackle studio, and the pile of grocery boxes, covered with old carpet, which had been her throne. Then, all suddenly, she had broken in upon them, not crying, but with a dry sobbing catch in her voice, terrible almost as the weeping of a man heard at noon-day on the open street.

"I was late," she went on. "I had stood too long there"—she pointed to the pile of boxes—"with the flowers you gave me—your 'Lady of the Lilies,' ah!"

She broke into hard and bitter mirth, laughing and sobbing at once, yet for all, in her eye no tear.

"And, you remember, Jerome said when it grew dusk, 'Run, father will be home!' But he did not come with me. And my father was waiting! He had been—to the club—down at the 'Three Sea Dogs'—why need I tell you? Yes, and he swore at me, and called me names—such terrible names. That is as always—I did not mind that. But I had vowed to him that the next time he beat me, I should never cross his door again. And I will not. I am here!"

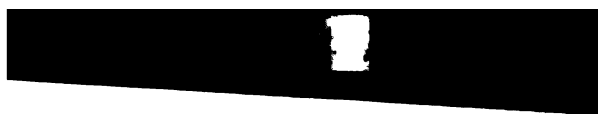
The men emitted a murmur of sympathy. Two of them had risen—men are slow and stupid



“ ‘ The one who speaks first, I will put my hand in his, be his true wife.’ ”

Little Esion.

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creatures at such times. Also they fear ridicule—and each other.

"I am here," she said, very slowly now; "understand, you Esson, you Fairweather, you John Glencairn, you Fuzzy, and you Hunter Mayne—you have all told me you loved me! Oh, yes—what is the need of making a secret of it now. You have—beast and bird and creeping thing, each one of you after his kind. You have asked me to share your lots, or so at least I understood you—how often you yourselves best know. Well, you can have me! Not all of you, but one! The one who speaks first, I will put my hand in his, be his true wife! As God is in His Heaven above, I mean it. There!"

Thus spoke, breaking in on the gloaming and the faint glow of lowered cigarette ends, Mina of the Painters' Camp, Mina the Proud, Mina Hilliard, the daughter of Claude Hilliard, Esquire, decayed gentleman and art connoisseur, and sister to Jerome Hilliard, also Esquire, painter in oil colours rejected at many exhibitions.

The five men to whom she spoke were in the order in which Mina herself had called the roll—Esson the Genius, water colourist, already the member of one of the Royal Societies and full on the road to fame. Little, however, and plain, a dreamer of dreams—over whom for the most part women's eyes passed, going further to fare worse. Next, and equally unremarkable,

there was Fairweather, the son of a rich contractor, who as his last and most permanent work, had recently bridged the Styx. Slender, delicate, graceful, was Terence Fairweather, his cheek bones touched with a too vivid red, at once the butt of the Painters' Camp and also, in some degree, its providence. Usually Terry sat quietly in the background, a cigarette drooping from his fingers, listening to the heated talk of the other men. There remained John Glencairn, the dogmatist, who knew how everything ought to be done, and was always willing to tell his comrades of it, without ever being able to finish so much as a sketch himself. Fourthly, there was "Fuzzy" Wells, the animal painter, who never spoke except when he had a brush or a pencil in his hand, when he talked incessantly, whether anyone was present to listen or not. Lastly, and Mina Hilliard had named him with a certain halt of the voice, was there not Hunter Mayne, lord and lawgiver of the little commonwealth of "Pitch-and-Toss," with a studio of his own, money, success, and already a name among the dealers, perhaps too early and easily won?

"Do none of you speak?" cried the girl. "Are you worse than my father? Has it come to this, that Mina Hilliard should have to beg of you which shall marry her? Are you liars all as well as cowards? Speak, men, speak!"

The silence endured one little moment longer.

Mina Hilliard passed her eyes over them with a look of scorn, before which the boldest quailed, and *he* was that Hunter Mayne whom she had mentioned last. But the next moment, steady, gentle, and soft, the voice of Terence Fairweather, rich Terry, at whom all save Little Esson laughed, caressed the gloom.

"I do not know whether you would care about *me*, Miss Hilliard," he said, "but if you really mean what you say, I shall do myself the pleasure of asking you to be my wife?"

Something strong and rending caught Mina Hilliard sharply by the throat. She paused again before answering, and, in spite of herself, her eyes sought again the handsome figure and downcast face of Hunter Mayne. Then, with a sudden access of something like anger, she held out both hands with the action of giving a gift out of the heart's fulness.

"You—Terry!" she faltered now, and her voice was strange and thrilling to hear. He nodded, standing quiet and steady in his place, waiting.

Then all at once she threw out her hands with a swift gesture of one who gives irrevocably.

"There," she cried, "I am yours! I will be your wife! Take me!"

But even so she looked over her shoulder at Hunter Mayne. He made no sign, moodily regarding an irregular burn in the carpet, made by a faggot which had toppled from the brazier

which Jerome Hilliard had brought from Venice the year he went to Egypt at the expense of Terry Fairweather.

Unconsciously the men had all stood up—all, that is, except Mayne. It seemed so sudden a catastrophe, the breaking up of their innocent and mirthful summer company. And Mina, their dear, gay Mina! Now, with the birch faggots blazing up clear, they could see the cruel marks on her arms already growing purple. Ah, then their hearts began to glow within them. How slack they had been! Why had they not spoken? Poverty had held some in leash, the caution natural to Scottish blood another, shyness and self-distrust had kept Little Esson silent. What had held Hunter Mayne, he himself knew. And perhaps his own heart already cried shame upon him for his cowardice. His was the right. His was the plain duty. And Mina Hilliard, when she entered that rickety wooden studio a little way back from the beach of Creelport-on-Dec, had felt in her heart that at the first word spoken she would find herself in the arms of Hunter Mayne.

Instead it was Terry Fairweather who stood holding her hands and stammering what he meant to be thanks. Thanks! Ah, yes, she had promised herself to Terry Fairweather, gentle retiring, silent Terry, who hitherto had scarcely done more than follow the crowd in their bolder admirations. That he was rich, never crossed

Mina's thoughts. She had been brought up to think that the ability to paint, to write, to do something, was the only thing worth caring about. Men were to be judged by that—and by their good looks. Terry was ashamed of his wealth, so that in Creelport he went ostentatiously about in an old canvas jacket, smelling of turpentine and oil.

"What shall we do?" Terry was fumbling for ideas. "We cannot get married to-night. Could you not——?"

"Never, never; I will not go back!" cried the girl. "I have given—you have taken. I am yours—your property, your chattel, your THING! Do with me what you will. Go back home—home? No, I will not. I will wander the streets first!"

"Your aunt," suggested Little Esson softly in Terry Fairweather's ear. No one else heard.

"My aunt, Lady Grainger," he repeated aloud. "I believe you are right." His father's sister had married another and less successful army contractor, who, in spite of being an honest man, had managed to get himself knighted. Lady Grainger had never recovered from the shock of her sudden dignity. Yet, in spite of it, Sir Titus Grainger had died poor, and in that little remote community his widow lived chiefly upon her title—and her nephew. Only Terence Fairweather, however, knew this, and to all the rest of the world Lady Grainger wore the outside of a duchess.

"To my aunt's," Terry murmured. "I never thought of that. Yes, let us go there at once!"

And, with Mina Hilliard's hand in his, Terence passed out into the rich dark, leaving the men silent and strangely ashamed behind him. The young moon, drooping behind the trees, hardly lighted their way. Terence coughed and shivered as the damp chill from the river struck him, and his slim form swayed a little sideways.

"It is not far to Broom Lodge," he said, with an effort at encouragement. Mina paused upon the bridge, leaning her weight upon his arm to stop him. It was a long, low arch, and they could hear the swirl of the tide beneath. Twice a day it filled the deep trough of the Dee with the lapper of waves and the soft wash of foam, creaming up from the wide, hot sands of Solway.

Broom Lodge stood a little way out of the picturesque, half-Dutch town of Creelport. By day it offended every rule of art. It was erected in the cheapest taste of the local builder, who had spent himself on bow windows to the upper floors, and had forgotten to put in staircases, until the slight defect was pointed out to him by the first tenant. But now it was overgrown with ivy and roses, and in the gloom of a summer night showed not uncomely with its mellow lighted windows shadowed and nestled among the deep greenery, and the sound of the birds squabbling together comfortably on the verge of sleep.



" ' Aunt . . . I have brought you the young lady I am going to
marry.' "

Little Esson.]

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"Aunt," said Terence Fairweather gravely, as he stood in the hall, holding Mina by the hand, open-eyed and distraught, "I have brought you the young lady I am going to marry. You will do me the favour—and it is a great one—to care for her till—till I am able to make the necessary arrangements."

Lady Titus Grainger, a stout, red-faced, loud-breathing woman, in tight black satin, with no touch of white about her except the lace on her cap, stood staring at the intruders.

"Marry," she stammered, "marry Mina Hilliard—Claude Hilliard's daughter!"

Terence felt the girl's hand tremble in his. He knew that at the first word of unwillingness from his aunt she would turn and flee out into the night.

"Mina, stay there a moment," he said. And he stepped to Lady Grainger's side.

The words he spoke in her ear were few. But the Scottish legal term "bond" was among them, as well as that other more commonly understood, "yearly allowance." And before he had finished speaking the fashion of Lady Grainger's countenance altered.

"My dear," she said, running to Mina with a curious bouncing pad of her feet, like a hippopotamus in rubber shoes, "my dear, you have certainly been shamefully used! Welcome to Broom Lodge! Take off your cloak! No, then come upstairs first."

And considering that hitherto Lady Grainger had looked upon herself as the natural heir to all Terence Fairweather's fortune (he had no relatives except his father's sister) this was as much as could fairly have been expected of her.

Terence turned and went out into the night, wondering if he had suddenly been beheaded.

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CHAPTER II

THE "GREEN GIRL."

STUNNED and dazed, Mina heard the door close on Terry Fairweather. She had to resist a strong impulse to run after him, not to overtake Terry, but to escape into the open air, to be clear of walls and puffing women in rotund satin dresses, who looked at her with angry gooseberry eyes.

Dimly, as if she were lying half asleep while someone was reading a dull tale, Mina heard Lady Grainger explaining how she made it a rule never to keep more than two maid servants, how it was the "night out" of the one, and how, as it was washing day to-morrow, she had sent Sally Hiddlestone ("as worthless an ape as ever was") off to bed, that she might have no excuse for malingering in the morning.

Mina did not answer. The house grated on her—its mistress also. Why were there dust-sheets on the stair carpets? Why in darkened rooms could she see the lustres of the chandeliers swathed dimly in white, like dead men

hung up in their shrouds, their knees to their chins ?

"Will you step there—no, further to the left ! The crumb-cloth is new, and I always insist——"

But what Lady Grainger insisted on was lost to the understanding of the girl. Mina found herself presently in her room. It felt at once close and chill, and Mina knew by instinct what would happen if she were to thrust a mirror between the sheets. Lady Grainger's spare room was but seldom occupied. Dimly within herself the girl thought, with that small part of her brain which occupied itself with her own concerns, "I will keep on my clothes when I lie down."

Idea of sleep she had none. She only longed for the woman to be gone that she might think—think—*think* ! But Lady Grainger was doing something, and when Mina realised what it was, through the briefest moment of indignant anger, there pierced a desire to laugh long and loud.

There were brushes and nick-nacks of silver on the dressing-table, placed there for show, because no guest ever came to Broom Lodge to sleep a night. So now, while Mina stood by the mantelpiece abstractedly taking off her hat, Lady Grainger was busy at the dressing-table making a clean sweep of the silver ornaments. She had lifted up her crackling black satin skirt into a commodious lap to hold them.

"My daughter's," she said in explanation, turning her head half round and speaking over her shoulder.

"Could you not take the marble timepiece, too?" said Mina, stung with that quick sense of the ridiculous which makes certain tongues wag too fast.

But Lady Grainger was not offended. She looked upon Mina's suggestion merely as an additional precaution which had been suggested to her by a disinterested party.

"In the circumstances," she said with great dignity, "I do not think that—there will be any occasion."

Then, as if to point the enormity of the inconvenience to which her guest was putting her, she added, "One must just do the best one can—in the really remarkable circumstances!"

Mina, whose forbearance was none of the most boundless, would at any other time have made the circumstances yet more remarkable by abruptly quitting the house. But to-night all her faculties were blanketed—even her pride, usually so spiny and promptly insurgent, was dulled. The bars on her arms and shoulders had lost their red and angry appearance. They only ached dully now. So Mina stood silent. Her whole soul, if it did anything, prayed for the woman to go and leave her alone.

But Lady Grainger had no idea of letting the girl off so cheaply.

"I can understand," she said, clearing her throat, "why you do not care to go back to your father's house. That cannot at all times be a very suitable residence—for—for any respectable young woman. And your brother—such associates—I wonder that Terence——"

Lady Grainger had a way of not finishing any of her sentences, which was at once effective, and which, when it came to a pinch, did not commit her to anything.

Still Mina was silent. If there was a God above, surely He would rid her soon of this woman. If not, why, then the devil—who was prompting the dowager in black satin thus to tear the heart out of a poor girl at her wits' end.

"Terence wishes to marry you," Lady Grainger went on, smoothing down the sheets of the damp bed into an envelope flap, and regarding the effect first by turning her head to one side and then by turning it to the other. "It is certainly surprising, most unheard of. We have always understood—Dr. Calomell as good as told my dear late husband, Sir Titus, that it would be a crime, no less than a crime for Terence to think of marrying. Consider the children, my dear—"unto the third and fourth generation," so it is written in Holy Scripture! And indeed his father was—ah, well, it is perhaps as well that you should not know. And as for his mother, those who knew her best

—but after all it does not matter. When did he ask you, my dear ? ”

“ He did not ask me,” said Mina with much brusqueness. “ *I asked him !* ”

Lady Grainger did not reply directly. She only said, “ You are excited—and naturally ! Something has happened—why will you not take off your cloak ? ”

“ The room is chilly,” said the girl. “ I was posing for my brother, and came straight from his studio.”

“ Ah, then, you have quarrelled with him. I see—a family tiff—and Terence, whose head was never very—very—you understand—has brought you here. Very proper ! Very proper indeed ! I will go round and see your father in the morning. I don’t mind the trouble. I used to know Claude Hilliard when he and I were both younger. I dare say, when he comes to himself—that is, when he—but you need not apologise. Everybody knows his weakness. And with all his failings, Claude was born a gentleman—though, indeed, he never could conduct himself like one.”

Mina’s heart performed a sort of hollow litany to the burden of “ How long, O Lord, how long ? ”

But she said not a word. Her father was nothing to her, and as for the woman in black, scuffling satin, Mina wondered vaguely if you put a pin well into her, would she burst or only hiss like the punctured tyre of a bicycle.

In a little she grew remotely conscious that her hostess was bidding her good-night. But in what words she responded, or if she responded at all, Mina could never remember.

Presently she was alone in the spare room of the Lodge, the solitary candle waving a little in the draught from the open window. A soft wind from the sea was entering. The tide was bringing up a breeze with it. There came a sighing from among the trees, and far away on the water the broad plane of moonshine broke up into a myriad ripples. Mina blew out the candle a little petulantly. She wanted to think, and that yellow mark of exclamation perched on the chest of drawers somehow impeded her.

Drawing her cloak closer about her, she went to the window, groped in the dusk for a chair, and sat down. Now, now at last she would think. What was to hinder her from thinking? She had been longing so for solitude. Now she had it. Long ere the sun rose again into the sky, she would have time to understand it all. What was ALL? All to her was just why Hunter Mayne had been silent. She must think that out—all he had said to her, that very morning even, when she met him as usual in her walk round the Town Meadows. He was painting a hawthorn glade, of which the blonde creamy blossoms were browned with frost. So were her hopes—her life—her—— She tried to think why, at the moment of Fate, the moment when

she had been exalted to the highest pitch of determination, when she was ready to fling away her life, herself, her all—he should only have looked dully at the carpet, and let Terry Fairweather speak before him. But, somehow, she could not think, she could not fix her thoughts. He had on a red tie, and his head had looked handsome against the pale green and purple flicker of the birchwood faggots. She could remember that. She could smell his tobacco among the others. He smoked a pipe, but he had promised to give it up when——

There came a little tap at the door. Mina turned her head with a sense of vague discomfort. Who could be coming in? She thought discontentedly of Terence Fairweather. Perhaps he had come back to tell her something. She did not want Terence Fairweather just then. She wanted to recall the morning, all that *he* had said. She wanted to re-live the evening, when she had broken in on them, half wild, at the studio. She wanted to repeat all that she had expected him to say—and which he had not said. She wanted to remember—— But the knocking at the door came louder, just as, distinct as in the broad daylight, she saw before her (she knew not why) the pattern on his pocket-book. It had lain on the grass that morning while he talked. It was red stamped leather, and he had brought it from the East somewhere. It was red—yes, but it smelt tawny, somehow—

like his hair and pointed beard. Mina could smell colours, she had lived so long amongst artists. She was thinking of this when the knock fell again on the door, louder this time and more insistent.

"Come in," she said.

It was a girl younger than herself who entered—little, thin, plain, the light filtering up palely from the green-shaded student's reading lamp which she carried in her left hand. A miniature Lady Macbeth, equipped with dripping dagger, could not have looked more ghastly, the black shadows of her thin ankles seen under her short dressing-gown wheeling behind her, and the greenish lamp shade splashing her sallow cheek and brow like a disease.

She approached quite close to the window before she spoke. Mina looked at her, fascinated.

"I am Hilda Grainger," she said, without the least greeting. "I have always believed that my Cousin Terry was to marry me. Who are you that dares to come here like this?"

Her self-possession came back to the girl. All her life she had lived much among men, which helps amazingly.

"I am Mina Hilliard," she said, "and I have heard of you. But I thought you were a little girl at school." •

There was no scorn intended, but the tall girl, standing up with the turn of neck which all the artists who swarmed at Creelport-on-



“ ‘ I think you said that you expected to marry Mr. Terence Fairweather.’ ”

Little Esmon.

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Dee persisted in raving about, looked naturally a little haughty. She did not mean it in the least. She merely could not help it. But quick flames sprang from the eyes of the girl with the lamp. Green fires of hate they were, and would gladly have destroyed Mina Hilliard where she stood, outlined clear against the glimmer of the moonlight outside—the moonshine on the sea.

"I *was* a little girl at school," she said, enunciating fiercely, "but I know more than all Creelport. I have not been ten years away for nothing. And among other things I have learned how worthless girls entrap men—rich men—sick men—men who can be depended on to die and leave them their money away from their relatives!"

Mina sat down. She was not afraid now. This was only a woman speaking, an angry, jealous woman, and Mina, though she preferred the other, understood her own sex. Most women do not.

She had a thousand angry words at her command. They rose to her tongue-tip, but she only answered softly, "I think you said that *you* expected to marry Mr. Terence Fairweather!"

Then Hilda Grainger set down her lamp. She would have given all she possessed, she would have given one of her remarkably beautiful hands, to have been tall enough at that moment to hold up the lamp and survey Mina with it

from head to foot, like a police officer examining a suspicious character. She had seen the night policeman do that several times from the window of her Highgate dormitory. But instead she only set it on the opened leaf of a bureau, which was let down for writing upon. Her mother had opened the desk automatically. It was inlaid, and she always did that when anyone came in to see her spare room. She did it without thinking, even for Mina Hilliard.

"So *you* have trapped Terence," said the "Green Girl." "No, I will not go till I know all about it. You can hoodwink my mother. She is a fool—a fool first of all to let me stay away so long while you played your tricks. I have heard of you. Oh, I got many letters from Creelport—all the time I was at that wretched school. My mother wanted to marry again. That is why she left me there so long. I know. But she missed her catch. And so may you, too, Miss Mina Hilliard, who would steal *my* money, the money that should come to me from Terence, even if he did not marry me. You are a thief—no better! Upon whom have we lived for years? Upon Terence! On whom do we depend for the rent of this very house? On Terence! Who saved that very chair you sit on from being sold by auction to pay my father's debts? Why, Terence Fairweather! And for all that, he was to marry me. I would have loved him. I would have

made him happier, been a better wife than you. You need not laugh!"

"I had no thought of laughing," said Mina softly.

"Mamma thinks I do not know," said the girl, "but I know more than she or anyone guesses. There are few things a girl with brains cannot find out. Brains! You have no brains. You never got a prize at school, nor, indeed, ever went to any school worthy of the name. I was going to Cambridge this winter, or to London—that is, if Terence had not—but that is all over now! I suppose you will want to keep all his money to yourself!"

"I did not even know he had any money," said Mina calmly. "I thought your mother, Lady Grainger, was rich and helped him to be a painter. He always goes about in an old coat—like the rest of them."

"Innocence, thrice blessed innocence!" sneered the girl, leaning forward as if, like a snake, she would strike. "I am not nearing eighteen and have not had ten years at school in London without knowing better than that. Your artists—oh, I have heard of them. I have learned more of Creelport, though I have never set foot in the place for ten years, than my mother will ever know. Artists—faugh—a beggarly set! Everyone of them is sponging on Terence. Your own brother wins his money at cards, and borrows it when he can't."

"It is a lie," said Mina, hot for the first time. "My brother can sell all the pictures he paints!"

"Paints," said Hilda, shrugging her thin shoulders; "why, it's Little Archie Esson that goes over them out of pity; your brother only unloads paint on the canvas. And as to selling them! You have never been in the garret-room of Terry's house. Why, it is stuffed with their pictures—just stuffed. He buys them out of the exhibitions. He writes to the Secretary as 'Mr. Smith,' and offers a price, and the next thing you know, there's a red star on the frame, and the daub is sold—yes, S-O-L-D! But it is Terry all the time who is sold—yes, Terry, my cousin. Except Little Archie Esson and one or two of your precious Hunter Mayne's, there has not been a picture honestly sold out of Creelpport for half a dozen years. I know—if you don't. Ask Terry in the morning if it is not true."

"I will ask him in the morning," said Mina; "but, indeed, I do not need to. I can well believe it now—even on *your* word. He is good enough and generous enough for anything."

There was a bitter sneer on the girl's sallow face. The upper lip rising, uncovered some small, white teeth, very closely set, the spaces between being hardly visible.

"Is he generous enough, think you?" she said, twittering with rage, the words snapping sharp and electric, "to marry another man's sweet-

heart? *I* should not like leavings. I will ask him in the morning if *he* does!"

And she ran to the door as if she feared a personal vengeance.

"There," she cried, skimming a paper, school-girl fashion, across to Mina—"there, I make you a present of that. There are plenty more like it where that came from. Terry shall have them all—in the morning. Sleep well, bride-elect! Sweet dreams, Miss Hilliard. The game is not trapped yet—no, not quite!"

And as she vanished through the door, drawing it softly after her, Mina lifted the folded oblong of paper and opened it under the green shade of the student's lamp, which her enemy had left abandoned in her flight.

It was one of the letters she had written to Hunter Mayne—the winter during which he stayed so long in Creelport, doing nothing that anyone could put a name to.



CHAPTER III.

LITTLE ESSON TAKES THE HELM.

MINA sat long at the window—indeed, all that night, till the dawn came stealing up out of the woods to the east. It was red and orange and lake, like the colours on Hunter Mayne's palette when he had painted her as a Venetian fruit-seller, and it brought to Mina Hilliard the new day. She did not think very much about the "Green Girl's" threat; she did not think much about anything. Her mood was fatalistic. Something had happened the day before that had snapped all ties. It was not what her father had done. It was something that Hunter Mayne had *not* done. And the sins of omission are those that men are damned for—with God, hints Holy Writ—with women, certainly, says Experience. "Inasmuch as ye did it NOT," are in both cases the words of Doom.

It was a sorrowful land which Mina Hilliard's mind had set itself to explore. She had queened it long in Creelpport-on-Dee—indeed, ever since she had been the chiefest of the bevy of charmers in

white, on the day when, after answering correctly as to the date of the Battle of Hastings, she had left the grammar school for ever—a final ravishing vision of muslin and pale blue bows.

Hunter Mayne had not come into her life. He had always been there. Born in Creelport, he had gone abroad—to Rome, to Paris, to Antwerp, with her brother. He had returned with medals galore, and it was, so he told her, to remain near her that he first had founded what was now beginning to be called the Creelport School of Landscapists, a number of enthusiastic impressionists whose works needed to be viewed from a considerable distance in order to ascertain the subject, but whose “colour” was, without doubt, something very remarkable.

For such details Mina Hilliard cared little. But she could not think of a world without Hunter Mayne; and yet, in the day of her adversity, he had left her like a coward. She counted the times he had told her that he loved her. Well, all the “boys” had done that, more or less. But—Hunter Mayne had done it with a difference. Mina had always felt that when the time came—but there, what was the use of recalling what had now no meaning, no possibility. And forthwith she began to go over it all again, in her restless, wretched, sleepless, brain.

* * * * *

In the morning came Terry Fairweather with Little Esson. They had been to the Registrar

of Births, Deaths, and Marriages of the parish (such is the order in Scotland), and knew the lie of the land. Declaration before witnesses, in the cases of persons one of whom had lived three weeks in Scotland, constituted an irregular, but perfectly legal marriage.

The further formality of an interview with the Sheriff in his court sufficed for registration. But Terence Fairweather was resolved that he should wed Mina in open day with all the forms. So he had been to see the minister, Dr. John Broadbent, who had been forty years in Creelpart, and having walked softly all his days, was beginning to be thought not quite a stranger among that zealous and vigilant people.

Little Esson it was who, in spite of his stammer, put the case to the Doctor, while Terry hummed and hawed, and, in his turn, looked hopelessly at the carpet.

"Yes," said Dr. Broadbent, throwing back his fleece of grey hair with the gesture which he used in the pulpit when expounding a knotty passage, "you can be proclaimed in church three times on one day, and I will marry you the next. It will cost you five shillings. You have, I presume, made it right with the young lady?"

"She has not been very happy, sir," interjected Little Esson; "she cannot go home——"

"I understand—I understand," said the minister hastily; "you need not put Mr. Fairweather to the pain of explaining."

Indeed, all Creelport-on-Dee at once took it for granted that Miss Mina had good and sufficient reasons for leaving her father's house. Creelport knew Claude Hilliard, even to the soles of his shabby patent-leather boots. He was of it, and his father before him. His devilries were home-grown and to a certain extent discounted by Creelport at large—like the Galloway weather, the measles in the spring-time, the plague of lawyers resident in the town, the “displenishing sales,” and the potato blight.

Mina was still in her chamber when Terry Fairweather and Little Esson arrived at Broom Lodge.

“Wipe your feet, Terry,” called out his aunt, who always hovered in the background when Jane Myres opened the door. For Jane Myres had once been caught in somewhat too confidential converse with the postman; besides which, in the case of a favourite like Terry, or, indeed, with any young man of reasonably personable qualities, Jane quite lost her head and failed to remind the incomer that a scraper, a bass and two mats—one plain and one of woven wire—awaited his feet on the threshold. Jane Myres needed watching, like the foot of the stranger within Lady Grainger's gates.

“We have not this morning had the pleasure of seeing anything of your young friend, Terence,” said his aunt; “but I was just going to put on my hat and go round to talk to Claude Hilliard

after ten. There is no use going before, for the creature would not be up. I arranged it all with Mina last night."

"I think I must see her again before we take any steps," said Terry. But just then the girl who had visited Mina the night before entered by a side door.

"Your cousin Hilda," said Lady Grainger, with motherly pride. "You will hardly remember her, I am afraid. She is very highly educated!"

"I have heard of you—we have common acquaintances," said the young girl, looking at Terence spitefully. "How much did Hunter Mayne's last picture at the Institute of Oil Paintings cost you, Mr 'Smith'?"

Terry Fairweather looked astonished, as well he might, and then he blushed.

"I do not know what you mean, cousin," he said, turning his pale face full on the girl.

"Oh, yes, yes, you do, Terry," snapped Hilda Grainger viciously through her small white teeth. "It was, you remember, a Venetian flower-seller. Mr. Esson there (it is Mr. Esson, I think) painted most of it. But it was signed 'Hunter Mayne.'"

"You are misinformed," said Little Esson, whose assistance on that particular occasion had indeed been limited to criticism expressed with the utmost vigour and freedom.

But the girl went on without heeding his interruption.

"And now, having taken the picture at a price,

you are about to take over the original—somewhat second-hand, I fear—so, at least, my mother tells me.”

“I do not understand you,” said Terry again. He had grown very pale, notwithstanding.

“Well, you will before you have done with me. Be good enough to look at these letters ; you should know the handwriting ! If not, you will not mistake the spelling ! ”

Terry glanced at the bundle his cousin held out to him. He took it in his hand. There were about half a dozen letters in all, each in its original envelope. Terence Fairweather looked distastefully at the superscription on the uppermost. Then he skimmed the edges of the others with his forefinger.

“These do not appear to be intended for me,” he said, “and as they are probably of no further use to the owner, I will take the liberty of——”

He did not complete his sentence. It was a family characteristic.

The liberty which Terry took was to throw the bundle on the fire, which the early chill made a necessity in Creelpport all the year round. Having been written on thin foreign paper, the letters blazed readily and fiercely. At sight of them burning Hilda turned as green as she had done the night before, when the reading lamp was full on her face. She darted forward to save a part at least of her stock-in-trade.

But Terry put his foot across the bars of the

grate and kept her off, while Little Esson, occupying the full breadth of the register, thoughtfully stirred the leaves with the poker as they curled and uncurled in the flame, seemingly intent on things not of this world. Not till the little sheaf had been charred to its centre, and Little Esson had stirred the remains into black, flaky *débris*, through which crawled little fiery worms, did Terry Fairweather remove his foot.

"You silly fool," cried his cousin, clenching her fist; "you have ruined all. You do not know what it cost me to get these letters. Time, thought, planning—and all when I was five hundred miles away!"

"Ah," said Terry easily, "I am a simple fellow, and not learned, but I do know that letters which are not addressed to me can be no concern of mine!"

"But they are," cried the girl, "they do concern you—oh, you fool, Terence Fairweather!"

"Peace to their ashes," murmured Little Esson, giving another turn with the poker to the fiery worms on the grate.

"Oh, I could strike you—if I were only a man," cried the girl, the sallow green of her complexion accentuating the dark purple rings about her eyes. "I tell you it does concern you. Mina Hilliard has been for three years in love with——"

"That," said Terry, turning gently away, "I prefer to hear from Miss Hilliard herself."

"Good," said Little Esson, under his breath.

"Stick to it, Terry!" But at that moment Mina entered, having heard the sound of voices below. She was still of necessity in the dress of the evening before. The cloak she had worn was now buttoned closely at the neck, and drawn in at the waist by the strings, to form a sort of outdoor garment. On her head were piled the masses of honey-coloured hair of which all the artists in Creelpport had tried to catch the exact shade—without succeeding, even in their own estimation, which is a thing wonderful to relate. The girl's face was pale; not the faintest trace of red showed on her cheeks, while want of sleep had apparently doubled the size of her great, dark, steady eyes.

Terry would have stood gazing long enough from his usual post in the background if Little Esson had not pushed him forward. The sight of Mina Hilliard seemed somehow to take away from him the power of reasonable action. It was easy enough to plan and to do when she was not there; but the eyes that looked him through, that pale, grave face bent upon him, somehow reduced Terry to imbecility.

Under Little Esson's tutelage he went forward and took Mina's hand.

"Let us go," she said; "I cannot stay here. I am something less than welcome. Open the door, Esson. I thank you, Lady Grainger, for your hospitality—and you!"

Miss Hilliard bowed to Terry's aunt and to his

cousin in their turns. To the latter she said, "I thank you for what you have done—or tried to do!"

With these words she swept Terry to the door, his legs seeming to move of their own accord, the good Macadam of the road lapsing into thin air as in a feverish dream. Esson followed, shepherding these two irresponsibles. Lady Grainger and the "Green Girl" were left at the door of Broom Lodge staring after them. In another moment the "Green Girl" had seized the poker and explored the ashes. But the little painter had made sure work. He had burnt too many sketches on clearing-up days in the studio.

"To think," murmured Hilda, snapping her small even teeth like a rat-trap, "that *I* should be bested by two such ninnies."

She paused a moment and then added, "But it was that Little Esson—he has brains. The others never could have stood up a moment against me. I shall not forget. And now, I suppose, I shall not go to Cambridge. Well, some people may be sorry to have me in Creelport."

Outside, there was a short council of war.

"Take me to the studio—yours, Esson," said Mina Hilliard hotly. "Why should I care? It is my brother's also!"

Esson indicated the windows of the High Street with a cock of his chin. The low lace curtains with which these were garnished were slightly agitated at the right side of every window. The

gossips of Creelport were on the *qui vive*. The morning progresses of Terry and Esson had been noted. They were now being discussed in all their bearings. The appearance of Mina, who had stayed the night at Broom Lodge, instantly made everything more *piquant*.

"The minister," suggested Esson, saviour of society, "and"—he added under his breath—"the minister's sister! Let us go back to the Manse. Miss Bee once nursed me when I had brain fever. She thinks she knows my inmost secrets. But I rather guess I made them up, even when I was raving. At least, she knows much more about me than I do myself, for which she loves me ever since—so I must have confessed to something pretty bad."



CHAPTER IV.

THE THUNDERS OF SINAI.

ANY of the five senses, intelligently used, will serve to diagnose a Scottish manse, which is to say, the official residence of one of the ministers Presbyterian. Episcopalians have no manses. They are not native to the soil, but at the best what botanists call "estrays" or "escapes" from the great neighbouring garden of Anglicanism.

Now, the parish manse you could recognise by these signs: to wit, a white painted gate to its well-kept little avenue, a gate that actually swung and enclosed a general air of peace and *bien* comfort. A scent of must and dead leaves disengaged itself from among evergreens, and a fishing-rod and a deer-stalker cap were hung up in the hall. The Free Kirk manse was somewhat less time-honoured. It had just celebrated its jubilee. But you could see bookshelves through the window of every room, and there was a sound of children's voices in the garden behind. Married or single, the minister has to pay seven pounds a year to the Widows' and Orphans' Fund of his church,

and being a Scot and a prudent man, he does not mean to lose his money. The approaches of the U.P. manse (I am speaking of times already historic) conveyed a sense of bustle and the burden of affairs. Hurried messengers arrived and departed as you stood and looked. The minister himself passed out with an absorbed air. He had the plan of a new church-hall sticking out of one deep tail pocket. He carried the prospectus of a bazaar in his hand ; he called through the parlour window the last arrangements as to Monday night's *soirée* to his wife, and forthwith departed to pulverise one of his managers, who had dared to argue that the fact of having a shop open till eight o'clock at night was a good enough excuse. being absent from the weekly prayer-meeting.

Dinner was the meal of the day in the manse of the Establishment, lunch at that of the Free, and high tea in the land of the U.P.'s. Which things are truths discernible only to the Seven Wise Men, the *félîtres* of the mysteries ecclesiastical.

The manse of Dr. John Broadbent was strictly a parish manse, with a grave ordered melancholy of deportment, which made it almost part and parcel of its occupant. Dr. Broadbent was a bachelor, tall, parched, grey, but, said the women, "with the sweetest eyes in the world." He was not counted in the parish "muckle of a visitor," but his rare appearances were esteemed almost like the visits of the angels. A staid beneficence

dwelled largely within him. Candour was in his straight gaze, courage in the squareness of his nostrils, and a gentle touching humility appeared in his every action. In his early youth he had witnessed the Disruption, and he had seen many of his people leave him behind as a "Moderate," without ever letting them know how deeply the iron had entered into his soul.

And now in the years of his age (though, apparently, not a day older than he had been thirty years before), Dr. John went about his parish, gentle and a gentleman, full of secret good works and rather reticent of speech, but in every word and action, in his outgoing and incoming, always and before all things a peacemaker. In the pulpit it he was a sound expositor, though without "unction," no great preacher, not worrying his people or the Divinity with too frequent public offices, but exhaling from his whole person the daily prayer and that gracious silence of native humility which is true religion in all places and among all peoples.

Such was Dr. John Broadbent, and his sister was a helpmeet for him. Christened Barbara, for some unknown reason she had all her life been known as Miss Bee Broadbent. She was at least twenty years younger than her brother, yet she had spent well-nigh half a century in Creelport. She owned to fifty-five, which is the prime of life to a busy, loving, clever woman, who makes up for having no children of her own by

mothering all those belonging to other people whom chance brings within her reach.

So to the Manse of Creelport, which stands a little to the left of the North Road, nestling among some ancient ashes and scarred beeches, went Mina Hilliard, accompanied by Terry and Little Esson. Bee Broadbent had seen them even before Terry had opened the white gate. Also she saw the ten good wives dwelling advantageously along the aforesaid road, who had come out of their doors to look after the three. She shook her fist at these, and hurried impetuously forward to throw her arms about Mina's neck.

She had not a single question to ask. The Manse was not at all Broom Lodge.

"I knew you would come," she cried. "You dears—you should be married this very minute if I could do it! But at least I'll stir up John Broadbent. I made him tell me all about it this morning after you had gone, Terry Fairweather."

She looked at Terry and Esson as she spoke.

"You need cod-liver oil," she said, addressing the former—"yes, and new milk. I have a wonderful patent kind at the Manse. They draw it cold from the cod, and it's much more wholesome. I make John Broadbent take it sometimes, but as often as not he throws the bottle out of the window as soon as my back is turned."

"I will not do that," said Terry, smiling.

"And what are *you* doing here, Mr. Esson?"

Miss Bee demanded suddenly, as they approached the Manse door.

"I am—I am the friend of the bridegroom," said Little Esson, with a certain sadness of manner which did not escape the old maid's quick, grey eyes.

"But—I thought——?" began Bee, and then stopped for no apparent reason.

"You thought right," said Little Esson valiantly; "but——"

She nodded.

"Ah, well," she said, "perhaps you are fated to be like me. I have had mickle traffic with marriages all my life, yet I never wore the plain gold on my fourth finger. But there's a corner in the world for us all, Archie Esson, if it be only to stand by and see the joy of another."

"I have brought you—my—my—my Mina," faltered Terry. "She was all night with my aunt and my cousin at Broom Lodge."

"Out of the claw of the lion and out of the claw of the bear the Lord delivered David," said Miss Bee cheerfully. "Well, she shall not leave here till John Broadbent has safely tied the knot."

It was seven of the evening when Claude Hilliard came to the Manse to reclaim his daughter. He had "gotten track of the gipsy" some hours before, but, as he owned magnanimously to Bibby, the horse-dealer, a fat, red-faced Worcestershire man, he had doubtless somewhat forgotten him-

self the night before—though, no doubt, the girl had been aggravating. But he had not meant any harm. So he had given himself time to recover before facing John Broadbent. For, minister or no minister, he, Claude Hilliard, was not the man to have his daughter boarding round on the parish so long as he had a home. He would teach her. He had taught her, as it was. And in time the hussy would come to see on which side her bread was buttered, and be willing to marry the aforesaid Bibby, the horse-dealer and money-lender, to whom his dear friend Claude Hilliard had been under innumerable obligations which oftentimes pressed heavily enough. For Bibby's tongue was rough, his hand heavy, and he had an English readiness to avail himself of the processes of law, even in the case of such a bosom crony as Claude Hilliard.

In his friend's interests, therefore, as well as in those of a father's authority, Claude Hilliard, well primed with split sodas, arrived at the Manse of Creelport-on-Dee. Miss Bee spied on him from the upper window, and gave Lummy Itherword, the fifty-year-old maidservant of the Manse, directions what to say—directions which Lummy Itherword had no intention whatever of paying the least heed to. Had she (Lummy) been so long about the Manse of Creelport without kennin' how to answer Claude Hilliard ("sorrow fa' his doited dithering legs!") as well as Miss Bee? "Aye, better—far better! She was a pig-

merchant's daughter, and from her youth up kened how to speak to——"

"Lummy, I forbid you!"

"Forbid awa'," said Lummy (or Lumsden) Itherword; "but stand ye weel back, Miss Bee. I'll learn him that the manse o' the Reverend Dr. John Broadbent, minister o' the pairish o' Creeport, is no' the bar parlour up yonder at the 'Blue Lion.' *Wheesht*—there he is at the bell!"

* * * * *

Claude Hilliard had once been in the frequent habit of opening the white gate which led to the Manse of Creelport many years ago, when as yet Mina was not. Dr. John had taken a kind of fancy to the flighty, foolish, prettily-mannered youth, the spoilt heir of some thousands of barren moorland acres, who had spent most of his boyhood in the old family mansion in Creelport. Now Creelport-on-Dee, being a county town, the smallest save one in Scotland, was remarkable among other things for a row of good houses called officially the "West Borough," or, in the mouth of the commons, the "Braw Lands." These belonged to various families of small lairds who made a habit of coming to Creelport every winter where they associated with one another—being too poor to think of Edinburgh, and London, of course, being then quite out of the question. Among the smaller Scottish towns Maybole is the only other known to have possessed for centuries a similar winter colony.

So in the early days when John Broadbent, not yet Doctor of Divinity, came to the parish, there was other society to be found in the little town, besides the usual rollicking town blades, flourishing "vets," would-be smart tradesmen, and down-going lawyers, or the handful of artists who, painting all day and talking shop far into the night, had no dealings with these Samaritans of the "Three Sea Dogs" and the "Blue Lion."

Then the Hilliards of Kilterlilty were still somebody, and young Claude, the son of a French mother and a stolid, Galloway father, had more of the graces of youth and hope than any other lad of his years. John Broadbent would often open his door to his lively parishioner ere the evil days came, or the years had drawn nigh when John Broadbent was reluctantly compelled to say, "I have no pleasure in him."

But the Claude Hilliard who now stood without, his hand on the Manse bell-pull, was a very different Claude from the pretty, spoilt boy of a quarter of a century before.

Still, indeed, jaunty, erect, his grey moustache drawn carefully to a point, a very wide-brimmed, low-crowned hard hat of melon shape set sideway on three hairs, as the fashion had been in his youth, when Claude Hilliard was a country buck, he switched his leg impatiently with his cane, hummed an ancient operatic air, and hectorcd it in front of the minister's door, with what could have been intolerable swagger, but for the

fact that the man's whole being was evidently tottering to destruction like a house of cards.

"I wish to see Dr. Broadbent," said Claude Hilliard; and there was a hoarse gusting of alcohol in the raucous tones. Miss Bee shivered behind the door of the napery cupboard. As a little child she had sat on that man's knee, and once on a time—ah, once on a time, she had thought him adorable. But, at least, her brother had saved her from that.

"See Dr. Broadbent," repeated Lummy; "aweel then, ye canna! The Doctor's itherwise engaged."

"But I must, and at once"—the cane tapped the threadbare trousers more quickly—"I am told you have my daughter here among you."

"And if we hae," said Lummy Itherword, dauntlessly, "where is there a bieldier buss or a mair suitable shelter for a puir bit hunted lass than the Manse o' the parish o' Creelpart—aye, or better protectors than Dr. John Broadbent and his sister, Miss Barbara? Answer me that!"

"I will not bandy words with a servant," said Mr. Hilliard, frowning; "lead me instantly to your master!"

"'Deed, and I'll do no siccan thing," said the Manse "lass"; "and for a' your dour looks, Maister Claude Hilliard, formerly o' Kilterlilty, I hae seen the day when ye wad hae bandied mair words wi' a servant lass than a decent woman like mysel' wad bide to listen to. Gin your

dochter be here, whilk I will neither affirm nor deny, sic not being my duty——”

Claude Hilliard stamped his foot loudly on the step.

“I demand to see my daughter!” he exclaimed, his temper swinging suddenly loose with the dangerous causelessness of the dipsomaniac.

“Aweel, your daughter will ye no see here,” said Lummy, “nor the Doctor neither. This is no a hoose for slave-drivers and whuppers-in, or Deil’s rattlebags, either—like somebody I’ll no’ name.”

But Claude Hilliard was not so easily turned from his purpose. His ancient acquaintance with the Manse of Creelport stood him in good stead. With a sudden bend of his long body and a compass-like stride of his rickety pins, he darted round the corner of the house.

“Save us,” cried the astonished Lummy, rushing after him to catch at his coat-tails, “where’s the craitur ganging ower John Dibble’s carrot-beds! John will be a wild man when he comes up the loaning and sees that.”

But in a few moments Claude Hilliard stood at the tall French window, which, in the time of John Broadbent’s predecessor, had been made to please a new-made bride brought to Creelport Manse, a town lady, who did not choose that the village bodies should stare at her when she went out in her high-waisted Directory dress to drink the cool of the evening.

It was a peaceful room as any in the world, that into which Claude Hilliard stood and looked. So peaceful was it that he hated all who were in it. By the fire, with his back to the window, and his feet stretched out to the blaze, sat the Doctor, busy with his reading, a great learned volume on the table before him and on his knee a writing pad.

At the farthest end of the room, busied about the table, cutting and comparing patterns with frowning brows and compressed, silent lips, moved Mina and Miss Bee. Whence came the material, Miss Bee only knew, but the fact that they were making a wedding-dress was evident to the meanest capacity. Claude Hilliard knew it at a glance.

He laid his hand upon the latch of the window which opened like a door out on the green Manse lawn shaded with great trees, where so many generations of Creelport ministers had studied their sermons.

The tall shadow between them and the light attracted the attention of the busy workers. It was Mina who saw her father first. He had raised his cane as if to tap on the glass, whereat all suddenly the girl screamed and turned to fly. Miss Bee jumped at the sound, but the Doctor, absorbed and a little deaf, did not move.

"Oh, he has come to find me," cried Mina ;
"but he shall not beat me again. I will throw

myself into the river first. It was that, in his hand—with which——”

She got no farther. A shuddering horror seized her, and Mina hid her face in Miss Bee's neck. She had faced it out the night before, but now, having won her way to a new life at the price of a terrible resolve, she could not turn back to the misery and the fear.

“Brother,” said Miss Bee loudly, “do not let that man come in!” As she spoke she held the shuddering girl tight in her arms, lest she should flee to the dark tide water gurgling under the bridge. Mina would not have flinched on the field of battle; but to be beaten by a drunken man—and that man her father—her whole soul revolted within her with utter revulsion and amazement.

Dr. John went to the window and motioned with his hand to Claude Hilliard. “Go round to the other door,” he said with dignity; “I will see you there.”

“I have been refused admittance at your front door, I tell you,” shouted Hilliard, driving his words through the window panes. “I will come in. I want my daughter. Open, or I will break my way in with this stick!”

“You have already done more than enough evil work with your blows,” said the Doctor. “I am an old man, sir, but there is not the man in this parish who shall dare to enter my house without my will! ‘He that entereth not in by

the door, the same is a thief and a robber,' " he thundered, feeling the necessity of fortifying his belligerent attitude by Scripture; "and I have always preached the lawfulness of resistance to tyrants. Indeed, it is one of the fundamentals of our church. See on this subject Knox *passim*—also Hog, Veitch, and even good Mr. Principal Carstairs."

By this time he was at the front door of the Manse. Lummy Itherword tried to restrain him from opening it.

"Haud off, Doctor, the man's no canny," she cried. "The deil's keekin' oot o' his e'en! Let me speak to him. I ken a thing or twa that will maybe send him down the loan wi' his finger in his mouth!"

"Stand back, Lummy," said her master, with firm gentleness. "Let it not be noised abroad that there was ever a man in the parish of Creelport whom I, John Broadbent, was afraid to meet face to face."

"It's his back I wad like a chance at," muttered Lummy to herself, as she fell obediently to the rear. She remained, however, prudently within hearing, a broom-shank in her hand, ready to come up as reserves if Claude Hilliard should prove "ower snash" with the minister.

"No, sir," said Dr. John, "I will not deliver your daughter to you. I understand that you have most cruelly ill-treated her, in proof of which I have seen things that I would not have believed

of a heathen Turk or Moor, much less one of my parishioners."

"You will find that there is a law in such matters," said Claude Hilliard. The Doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"My record of parochial baptisms informs me that the young lady is over the age of twenty-one years," he said, "and I opine that you will do well to leave her where she is—that is, till she acquires another protector, with fuller powers than mine."

"I will denounce you, sir!" shouted Claude Hilliard, suddenly brandishing his stick over the minister's head. "I will let all the world know what you are—child-stealer, Jesuit, hypocrite, setting yourself up to interfere between parent and child. You will be chased from the country, sir—you will be hissed on the public street! You——"

"Claude Hilliard," said the Doctor, "I have known you long, and well do I know that neither your blame, nor even your praise, can mar the character of John Broadbent in the parish of Creelport. But this I do say, that if you do not put down that stick, it or you may happen by a mischance, conjunctly or severally!"

Once Hilliard struck at the Doctor, but only once. And then the rejoicing High Street of Creelport, crowding to its doors, had the pleasure of seeing a strange sight—its white-haired minister, Doctor of Divinity and ex-moderator of the

General Assembly, conducting a man down the manse avenue with immense strides, one bony hand firmly fixed in his collar, till at the gate he solemnly presented his captive with a gold-headed cane broken into several fragments. Then he saluted, and, turning on his heel, walked back home, closing the door of the Manse behind him.

On the steps had stood Lummy, almost dancing with excitement, exclaiming in piteous accents, "Kick him, Doctor! Oh, what for didna ye kick him—when here's me, Lummy Itherword, that wad gie a half-year's wage, hard-won siller, for the like privilege!"

As the facts became known, Lummy's sentiments were very widely re-echoed in Creelport, and the Doctor preached to a crowded congregation the next Sabbath day on the text, "Be ye angry and sinⁿot."

Nevertheless, a section, chiefly lewd fellows of the baser sort, partizans of Bibby the horse-dealer, upheld Claude Hilliard and his paternal rights as against the minister. But that did not greatly matter. For, as Lummy Itherword said, "No a man o' them dared set his nose within the Doctor's white gate, for fear o' the very thunders of Sinai!"



CHAPTER V.

TERRY ASKS HIS WIFE TO SMILE.

"DEAR," said Terry Fairweather to his wife softly, as, high in the Engadine, they sat looking out on the snows of Forno and Fedroz—"dear, if it helps you to tell me, do so. You have loved me more than I could have hoped, more than I deserved. You have done everything for me."—after a pause—"given me everything, save only that which it was not in your power to give."

"And that is to say—I have given you nothing."

Terry raised himself from the great couch which had been brought out especially from England for him, lifted himself up on his elbow, eager of heart, like the boy he had ever been.

"No—*no*—No!" he cried, while his wife put out her hand to check his dangerous excitement; "it is not true. You have loved me more than I ever thought possible. Mina, my dear little Mina—I always knew. I never expected to be able to do more than just stand by you for a while. But I wanted to do that so much, to leave you with a home and a position. My money has

never been any use to me, you see, Mina. And when—when the chance came—that night in the Studio, I saw how it would take you out of that wretched place, out of that man's hands! And then——”

A fit of coughing interrupted his work. She put out her hand to stop him. But as it lasted longer than usual, she raised him up on his couch with all the lithe strength of her young body till his poor head lay on her bosom. Then she petted him, crooning over him, her hand ready with the potion as soon as the fit should be over.

Even while he coughed his eyes sought hers gratefully. A dumb fidelity of affection, mingled with a bitterness which her love had scarce sweetened, showed plain on Terry Fairweather's pale face. He lifted up his hand to place it behind her head and draw her down to him, but it fell limp on the brown Jægar rug she had bought for him as they passed through Båle.

“Hush, Terry dear, what is the use of troubling about anything?” she said. “We are here all alone, we two, away from everybody; and you know the doctor says that the cure has already begun to do you good.”

He nodded and smiled, well pleased, ready like a child to be turned from his purpose.

“At all events,” he said, “I am happy to be where I am. But perhaps I tire you?”

She clasped him tighter, still holding him to her, and then suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh, I do—I do," she moaned. "I never thought I should love you. I did not at first. But now, when it has come to us—oh, Terry, Terry, it is hard—hard——"

Her girlish phrases, half-sobbed, half-spoken, touched the young man to the quick. He moved in her arms as if he felt a spasm of pain.

"No, no, Mina, do not grieve," he answered quick to her unspoken question. "I am better—truly better. I want to live now—because you care about me a little. And Dr. Williams said wanting to live was half the battle. You remember Harley Street, and that big, gloomy room, the note-books with marbled edges that he consulted so often. Then the rows of people solemnly looking at odd volumes of *Punch* in the waiting-room outside, and the undertaker with the drooping side-whiskers who called out our names, as who would say, 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.'"

"Terry—Terry, do not laugh. Remember what Dr. Rhoeder said about that."

"I know—I know," said Terry, stopping and growing quickly grave again, "bring me the mirror, Mina. No, not that one—your own pretty one in the silver case—the one I bought you. So—now I shall see what sort of a husband the fates have given you to sick-nurse. You are a good hospital nurse, Myn dear. I should like to see you in the regulation white collar and cuffs. Though it does not matter, because I always love

to see you whatever you have on. Now, that's quite a pretty speech for a sick man ! ”

The room where they had installed themselves was the best and largest in the great Kursaal Maloja upon the heights of the long Engadine swell, just where it feathers over Italy, like a breaker changed into stone. They were almost alone in the hotel ; indeed, it was kept open chiefly for the sake of the very rich Englishman and his young wife, who, said all the staff, was devotedly attached to him, quite beyond the wont of the young wives of men rich and sick.

The room was warmed and ozoneized on the latest system, and as the apparatus had only been finished during the year, it had not yet been condemned as a death-trap—which is the fate of all superlative sanitary discoveries as soon as a newer arises. Outside, through the closed-in glass balcony, large as a conservatory, they could see the Forno Glacier setting its feet deep among the green pine-woods, behind the Catholic church which the Belgian count built. The sweeping white curves and black ridges led the eye upwards to the splintered peaks of the Val Bergel, on which the snow was only sprinkled, grey like hoar-frost. They were too steep for it to lie there.

Here Terry and Mina Fairweather had stayed six weeks, during which time winter had fallen, not coming gradually, as in less elevated regions, but descending like a catastrophe. Snow lay deep where ten days ago Mina had gathered the

last flowers of autumn. They blossomed on the slopes where she had looked in vain for edelweiss, while Terry watched her anxiously from the pastures beneath, basking his chilly limbs in the warmth of the good sun of September.

It was noon. The light blazed on the glass balcony, and at intervals Terry looked longingly on the finely gravelled walks without, and even on the rough upland grass between him and the lake, from which the snow had melted, and on which the members of the German band, in the absence of visitors, disported themselves like awkward, lumpish schoolboys.

Terry sat long with the silver-backed mirror in his hand, studying his own face.

"Let us cast up the reckoning," he said. "Item, hair better brushed than usual—that's you, Mina. Two hollow jaws, the same number of bright eyes, and two red, sixpenny bits on my cheeks. Do you know, Myn, —by Jove, I say, it is true. I used to have a lot of grey hairs there in front, where I put my fingers. The boys used to joke me about it. Well, now they have all turned black. It's happiness that has done that. Your work again, Myn."

The tears were running down the girl's face. She tried to take the mirror gently from his hand, but he held her off with the other, laughing.

"No, let me finish, dear. Sit there, in front of me. I will put the mirror so, beside your face. I want to see how we look, you and I, when we

go out. Husband and wife, Mina, husband and wife before all the world."

With a gasp Mina Fairweather commanded her tears, smiled Aprilly, and did as he bade her.

"Now, look pleasant, Myn," he said; "same as you do at a photographer's. Here goes. I'll begin. You first. Hair of honey-gold, and such pretty combs to hold it up with, always on the point of coming down—but never does altogether. Except at night, Myn, and then it does not matter, being prettier than ever. Eyes plush-velvet black, with purple reflections. I've often tried to paint them—so has—— Myn—Myn, I did not mean that. Forgive me. Even Esson could not get your eyes right—and owned it. Poor Esson! I believe he loved you more than any of us—except me, of course. He helped us, too, like a little man."

"He loved *you*, Terry," said his wife gently, "that was why."

"Oh, yes, good old Esson," said Terry. "He was fond of me. But he worshipped the Creelport mud you wiped off your shoes before coming into the studio—poor Esson!"

"Well," said Mrs. Terence Fairweather, sighing gently, "if that be so, he said less about it than any of you."

"I know—I know; he had more sense. He saw there was no use," said her husband. "I used to be a stupid enough fellow, Myn, and noticed little at the time, except how pretty you looked.



"Part of the contents drenched the hidden Mrs. 'Polly.'"

Little Esson }

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But, somehow, now things come back to me, clear as spring water in a tumbler. Now I can see and understand. Do you know, I believe I am getting cleverer. High time, says you—eh, Myn ? ”

“ It is living with me perhaps,” said his wife, smiling, willing to lead his mind into pleasanter paths, “ that has been known to help.”

“ You are too pretty to be very clever, Mina,” said her husband, smiling back at her, contentedly. “ The two things never go together. It is one of the compensations of life, as Dr. John used to say.”

“ Then I have grown stupider,” she smiled again, “ while you, clever boy, have been growing brighter ? ”

“ No, no,” he motioned with his hand. “ You always were clever—I stupid. But I do think, this being ill has sharpened my wits. Mina, did it ever strike you that I might end by getting better—strong, like the other fellows ? ”

She paled, her cheeks white as her brow, where the hat and the masses of honey-coloured hair covered it.

“ End by getting better, Terry ? ” she repeated. “ Why, I have always hoped it—prayed for it. You know that, Terry ! ”

“ Well,” he laughed, “ do you know, on my word, I think you and the doctor may not be so far wrong. Give me your hand, Mina. I am tired of this beastly old sofa-chair. See how the sun shines outside. Give me your arm, dear girl.

If I were only steadied up a bit, I declare I could walk twenty miles. Just hand me my overcoat. I cannot breathe here."

Mina flew to keep him in his seat and to restore the scattered rugs about his knees. "Terry, Terry," she cried, "be good. Oh do be good, for my sake! You know what the doctor says——"

"Doctors—they knaws nowt! For a' says what's a-noways true."

"No sort o' manner o' use to saay the things that a' do!"

He quoted the lines sketchily, trying to rise all the while, with his hands on the arms of the sofa-chair. Then with a sudden access of power, a rally quick and unexpected, he was on his feet before she could prevent him.

"My coat," he said. "Do this for me—help me, Mina. The light one. You say the wind is icy outside, but we will take a sharp walk and so home. Let us get off before the doctor comes. It is his business to keep me here—mine to get out. Quick, Myn!"

And to look at his glowing face as he hurried across the room, looking everywhere for his coat, his silk cravat, his gloves, there was indeed but a little of the old, quiet, weary, silent Terry Fairweather about him. Marriage had changed him into another man. He looked almost handsome as he turned to face his wife, who, very reluctantly, was getting on her things to accompany him.

But all suddenly, as he was in the act of rallying her on selecting a certain grey-plumed hat to fascinate the handsome Austrian cavalry officer who always stared so at her, he caught his hand to his throat, and it was all that Mina could do, by abandoning everything, to catch him in her arms and lay him back on the sofa.

The seizure was a momentary one. For when the doctor of the Sanatorium came in answer to her hurried summons, Terry was sitting up again, fuller than ever of nervous excitement. He even rose to shake hands.

"We were going out for a little walk," he said, "but my wife"—he always spoke the word with pride, and his poor wasted frame seemed to fill out as he pronounced it—"my wife is a tyrant; and—but why do you want to examine me to-day? It was only a fit of faintness, I assure you. I have been too long indoors."

Gravely and quietly the doctor bent to the examination of his patient, listening the while to his bright conversation.

"You are surprised to find me so much better to-day," said Terry; "indeed, almost quite well?"

The doctor nodded, but went on with his tapping and listening.

"Do you know, ideas run like wildfire through my head this morning. Even my wife allows that I am bright. And yet she will not let me sit out there in the glass balcony, because, she says, the cold will strike in. Now, I want a

good lunch. I am quite hungry—really I mean. When was I ever hungry before? Eh, doctor, answer me that. Will you lunch with us? What shall we order? That good Straw-wine or ‘the Valtelline which sparkled purple on the boards of Imperial Cæsar,’ as old Sigismond used to say at Davos, down in the Buol? I always liked to hear him say that, and then to see old Buol stare. I think *he* wondered why Imperial Cæsar did not come up to his *pension* for the winter-cure.”

Here a fit of coughing interrupted him. The doctor finished his examination and stood regarding Terry, his brows knitted, his lips compressed.

“Dr. Rhoeder,” the sick man began again, “tell me—are you of my faction or of that of my wife? Can I have nothing but bed and gruel—one sloppy treatment after another——?”

“To-day,” said the doctor gravely, “you can have everything you desire.”

Mina started, and her lips became almost the colour of her pale face; but Terry joyously clapped his hands at the news of a victory.

“Did I not tell you, Mina?” he said exultantly. “The doctor is with me. Have up the wine-card, Mina. We will order the Sasella now—the old green-sealed stuff which the count got for his own drinking.”

“I fear I cannot stay to lunch with you,” said the doctor, with great gentleness. “I have to go down to Casaccio to meet a patient who is coming up from the Lake. Good-bye.”

"Why 'Good-bye' so solemnly, doctor?" said Terry, peevishly. "It is only till this evening, you know—or the morning, at the longest. Or are you sad because your new patient—the one you are bringing up from Casaccio—is dying? Ah, poor fellow, I hope it is not too late. Whatever it has done for me, this Alpine air of yours kills very quickly those whom it fails to cure. But good luck, doctor, and may your patient be as fortunate as I have been."

On the landing, outside the door, Mina faced Dr. Rhoeder. That awful passage of eyes took place between them which has brought sorrow and anguish to so many millions of hearts. It happens when the door is shut on the half and quarter-truths of the sick-room.

"Well," it says, "put away those smiles, those meaningless cheering words. Now then for the truth, eye to eye, man to man—or more often, perhaps—man to woman. Which is it to be, life or death?"

That was what the dark, wide-open eyes of Mina Fairweather demanded, imperiously demanded, of Dr. Carl Rhoeder. And Dr. Carl Rhoeder, who had pronounced more death sentences than all the judges in the land, or in many lands, was not the man to lie.

He took Mina's firm womanly hands in both of his. They were trembling.

"Madam," he said, "by my age I might be your father—permit me at least to be as your

brother. Let your husband have all he wants to-day. He will die during the night ! ”

“ Die—die—die—— ? ” she uttered the words in a low, hoarse whisper, thinking, as women do, of her husband even then ; for when you nurse the sick you must never forget. “ No—surely not. I was beginning to have some hope. Even I ! He seemed so much better to-day—I have never seen him so well, so bright, in all my life ! ”

“ Be brave,” murmured the doctor, “ brave for his sake. Let him die happy. Do all he asks. This is the death rally ; it is quite characteristic on these Alpine heights. God give you strength, dear madam ! I shall be back in the morning.”

And he was gone. Mina Fairweather, still as death itself, stood with one hand on the smooth ebony knob of her husband’s door. She gripped herself, tapping her foot a little on the mat, and biting her lip hard. One hand mechanically caressed the simplicity of her tailor-made dress, plain, grey cloth, which fitted her figure without a wrinkle.

“ Yes,” she said, speaking the words with an indrawing of breath, “ I *must* be brave—I will be brave ! He shall see that I do indeed love him—but oh, how much less than he deserves. If only—if only I had had more time ! Oh, Terry, Terry ! ”

She went in again and found her husband lying on the sofa, very pale.



“ ‘ Let your husband have all he wants to-day. He will die during
the night ! ’ ”

Little Esson.]

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"What were you saying to the doctor so long?" he demanded, a little peevishly. "Was he telling you anything I was not supposed to hear?"

Mina turned her head to the side with the wayward air which she knew he liked so much. He called it her "princess pout."

"Perhaps even a doctor is not sorry to talk to me for a minute, you jealous boy. Have you anything to say against it?"

He turned towards her, and with a swift, repentant gesture, took her hand. Then he laid it against his cheek.

"I am not afraid," he said. "I used to be—at first. Yes, I confess. You were so lovely, and I—I looked so insignificant beside you. My cousin Hilda said so, you know—the 'Green Girl,' as you called her—she prophesied it. Kind of her, wasn't it? But I *made* you love me. I am glad, eh, Mina?"

She nodded, silently, praying God that he would help her to keep the tears out of her eyes.

"Dear," he said, "do you know you spoil me, but I will make it up to you. Up till now I have only been a worry to you. But when I get well—next spring, when I take you to Venice, perhaps—or to Normandy, when the apple-blossom is out. I know I can paint pictures as good as Little Esson's. Why, I can see them in my head. I could write books, too, and after a little, when I get stronger, I will. I feel that I could do anything for your sake—for the sake of your love.

Oh, it won't be any more, 'That's the husband of the b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l Mrs. Terence Fairweather! But, oh, *that* is little Mrs. Fairweather—you know, the wife of *the* Fairweather, the celebrated poet and painter!' How will you like that, my pouting princess? Ah, here comes the Sasella! Careful with that bottle, boy; it sparkled on the board of Imperial Cæsar!"

Then, between coughing and laughing, he chanted to a music-hall catch,

"Imperious Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

Mina Fairweather, tried beyond her powers, gasped at the ominous words; and then, again gripping herself with both hands, turned on her husband a face as pale as death itself.

"Stop, Terry," she said. "For God's sake, stop! Don't sing that."

"Why, what's the matter, Myn?" he asked, looking up surprised. "Speak to me. Is it anything that swab of a doctor has been saying to you outside? Ah, I see. You were not to tell me." Here his face changed suddenly as the truth smote him full. "I am dying. What is the word—'the last rally'? Well, Myn, it is hard on a fellow. . . . No, don't deny it. Lying is no use. I see it in your face. Rhoeder could not lie to me, I suppose, so he set you on to do it. You don't do it well. Your hand Myn. It's deuced hard on a fellow—just when—when

I had made you like me a little—more than a little—ch, Myn? Well, well, it might be worse; you might have married Hunter Mayne—and—and you married me instead.”

His wife bent her head suddenly upon his shoulder, and burst into tears. Terry answered to the appeal like a charger to the spur.

“Steady, Myn,” he said, putting an arm about her neck. “Go slow, old lass. I’m not worth crying for—though I *have* made you care about me a little these last months. And that’s one comfort!”

“Terry—oh, Terry,” she sobbed. “I cannot bear to lose you—I cannot do without you—I love you!”

He patted her gently with his hand, as one soothes a fractious child.

“No, Myn, no,” he said. “I love *you*—I always did. I knew from the first you would never really love a fellow like me. But then I knew, too, that I could make you like me ever so much. I played for that—and I knew, too, that—that—it would not be for long!”

His hand rested on her thick, many-coiled hair. She had sunk to her knees before him, and lay with her cheek on his lap, convulsed with grief.

“Hush thee,” he murmured, over and over, dry-eyed and smiling. “Dear, listen—think what you have done for me. You have given me these happy months—so happy. I never tasted life before, did I? They were all the sweeter because

I knew they would be few, and—that neither of us would have time to get tired of the other. Do not cry, there's a brave girl. God has sent you into my life for good—me also into yours. Myn—dear Myn ! ”

Mina Fairweather sat up and looked at her husband, the tears still running softly down her cheeks. His translucent hands, long and delicate, caressed hers.

“ Myn, dear,” he said. “ I want to talk to you a little. It's about business, this time. About the future—*after*——”

Mina started, wide-eyed, divining his thought. Indeed, the sinking of his voice at the last word told her all.

“ I shall never marry,” she said, forestalling him—“ never, never—never ! ”

His hand touched her hair, descended over her cheek, gently patted it, and then was seized and kissed eagerly, nervously, wistfully.

“ Dear,” he began again, still more softly, “ listen. You *will* marry again—yes, hearken to me this once. Do not break in. I wish it, I hope it. Indeed, that was partly why I married you. Otherwise, knowing what I know, I would scarcely have had the right. But, Myn, I want you to marry a good man. I have thought about it—yes, many nights, not stirring lest I should waken you. Dear, do you know, it had a certain strange, sweet taste for a fellow to lie awake thus, the coverlet rising and falling with your breathing,

while he thought and planned about the right man for you to marry—when—when—after——”

“Oh, hush! hush, Terry!” cried his wife; “have you no pity?”

“Dear,” he said, “I have all the pity that may be in any man’s heart. I took you at a hasty word. You have not known what it was to love—not fully, as a girl like you ought to know. But I see clearly now. Listen, Myn; I am a far richer man than anyone knows of. Did you ever remark that I paid the bills over here (and they have not been small ones) by making you write cheques on a great French bank? No, of course, you would not. Well, dear Myn, most of my money stands there in your name. You can get it when you like. My father, for reasons of his own, at a time of great risk to himself, when he was in danger of his life in Britain, placed a very large part of his fortune in the French *rentes*. Indeed, nineteen-twentieths of all. Only lately did I come into possession of that part of his fortune, when I was twenty-five years of age. Well, dear, I have done as I promised before I married you. I have left two-thirds of my fortune—so much as is known to exist in England away from you—to my aunt, Lady Grainger, and her daughter. I have left you, so far as Britain is concerned, only your strict legal third. I have so diminished my properties in England that you will be a poor woman, with little more than the necessities of life—that is, so far as the people

of Creelport are to know. Dear, I have one thing to ask you, only one. Will you do it ? ”

Mina looked at him, the tears still in her eyes, her breast rising and falling tempestuously.

“ Terry,” she said, “ I promise you before God to do as you wish.”

“ Well, then, dear, when you go back to Creelport (for you will go), let it be as a poor woman. Brave the taunts of Lady Grainger, and the reproach that I have left the bulk of my estate away from you. Promise me that never till the day of your marriage—and not till the sun sets upon that day—will you reveal that Terry Fairweather left you a rich, a very rich, woman.”

She nodded through her tears.

“ I promise,” she said ; “ but, indeed, it is useless, Terry. I shall never marry again.”

He patted her head gently, indulgently, a peculiarly sweet expression, almost playful, flickering about his lips.

“ Smile at me, Myn, just this once,” he said ; “ and whenever you think of me—afterwards—I want you to smile—yes, like that. Don’t be sorry at all. And then you will say, ‘ Terry—dear boy—how good he was to me ! ’ ”

And so, in the warmth of his wife’s smile, and with his eyes deep in hers, the night came for Terry Fairweather.



"Mina looked at him, the tears still in her eyes."

Little Esnon.]

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CHAPTER VI.

CREELPORT'S UNRULY EVIL.

THERE was a strained hush of expectation in Creelport. Young Mrs. Terence Fairweather was coming home. That is to say, Mina Hilliard, whom her husband had cut off with a bare fifty or sixty pounds a year, leaving, so they said, all that he legally could away from her, to *her* enemies and *his* relations, Lady Grainger and her daughter.

"There must have been something sore wrong," purred the worthies of the little Scottish township, naturally prone (like the do-nothings of all small societies) to think the worst, and to say even worse than they thought.

"He has found her out, I'll wager!" said Mistress James Yellowlees, the uptown baker's wife, wondering if her husband had gotten in his week's supply of "chemicals" and "sweeping stuff," all labelled "Finest Five Stars Wheat, Minneapolis Mills, Minn."

"I never thought muckle of that Hilliard lass mysel'," said Mistress "Polly" Purdie. "My guidman, when he was the nicht watchman in

the service o' the honourable the Town Council and magistrates, used often to say——"

"Call him the night-policeman, and hae done wi' it," said Mrs. Yellowlees, who, in her heart, thought the ex-officer's widow too far beneath her to be allowed to put on airs.

"Aweel, at ony rate," continued Mrs. "Polly," not a whit set back, "my guidman often saw her on the street at hours when a' decent folk should be in their beds."

"Tut," said Mrs. Yellowlees, willing to propagate scandal on her own account, but resenting Mrs. "Polly's" attempts to make her pass on the inventions of others, "there's little that is new in that. The puir lass was doubtless seekin' her faither—that wad never come hame till a' hours, or maybe that waffie o' an artist brither o' hers——"

"Aweel, it may be sae," said Mrs. "Polly," "ye dootless ken best, mistress, you being in a public situation—and my puir man dead and gane a twal month come Martimas."

"The mair need, then, for you to think the best ye can o' the lassie Hilliard, that has lost *her* man but barely thirteen weeks, and is left wi' scarce enough, so they say, to pay for the bite she puts intil her mouth."

"She will hae her lawfu' third," said Mrs. "Polly"; "they canna rob the widow o' that; and though it has been sair squandered amang thae artist loons, and naething but a pittance

left, it will aye pay for guid baker's bread—like yours, Mistress Yellowlees ! ”

“ I hae nae reason to be ashamed o' my bread, nor o' my baps neither,” said the baker's wife, bridling ; “ and gin it be the puir thing's guidwill to eat oot o' my shop, and if she pays her bills every Saturday reg'lar, it is no my business to say her nay. And as for a bit shortbread at an orra time—or a wheerf ginger snaps—I am sure that the bit lass is welcome to them wi' all my heart.”

“ It's you that has the guid heart,” crooned her gossip. “ Aye, dear, but what it is to hae the wherewithal to gie, and withal the kindly willing mind. It's no' at every door that she nicht look for the like. For, in time past, Mina Hilliard held her head high, when she was in the town afore. It will be a sair dooncome for her to live in Dickie Dickson's bit cottage. They say she has ta'en it frae the Earl by the half-year. Ye see, he kenned her faither when he was laird of Kilterlilty and a magistrate. He wadna be willing to gie her a langer tack, and dootless the like o' her couldna get caution. Aye—aye ! ”

Mrs. Yellowlees abstractedly put some Albert biscuits (which had been too long in the window, and had become a little fly-blown) back in the bottom layer of a tin box of them that was going out to the Orphanage, where her husband had a bread contract. She filled the blank in her window-dressing with four fresh ones off the top. Then she closed the lid and pasted a strip of blue

paper saved for the purpose round about the join. All was in the way of business, and she did it mechanically.

"I wonder," she said at last, when she had had her thought out, and it was ready to be clothed in words, "I wonder that Mina Hilliard likes to come back here, where she's kenned and noted. After her being married to such a rich man—wi' his tale o't—and her faither and brither but little credit to onybody. Had it been me, my certie, I wad hae had mair pride."

Mrs. "Polly," half sitting on the single chair which stood on the outside of the counter, but ready to pretend she had been on foot all the time if a customer entered, shook her head with admiring wisdom. Then she projected towards Mrs. Yellowlees a forehead bulging with solemnity. Mrs. "Polly" was a little pale-faced, insignificant woman, with sparse, tow-coloured hair, who seemed to pass her life in eluding observation. But, as she dodged furtively about, she could look more laden with other people's guilty secrets than any other woman in Creelport. For this reason she was popular among the large colony of folk who, in a remote country town, pass their petty lives in shadowing their neighbours with their suspicions, and reporting the results in hushed tones to each other.

Their password, and the commencement of every sentence they utter, consists of the apparently simple words—" *And it appears.*"

It was thus that Mrs. "Polly," leaning confidentially over the counter, and with her nose beckoning the ear of Mrs. James Yellowlees nearer to her, began—

"And it appears——"

But the baker's wife was that day somewhat "short in the grain"; so she interrupted remorselessly, "Ye have been at the gin again, Mrs. Purdie," she snapped, sniffing, as she did so; "and I'll thank ye no to puff the wind o' it in my face—sae long as your last three months' account is to settle."

Having regard to the circumstance referred to, it was impossible for Mrs. "Polly" to "take notice" of the affront. So she pocketed it in silence, and continued, "Ah, it was just a drap I gat oot o' the elbow o' Mistress Elton's flaskie when she was at the door rinsing it oot. But, as I was sayin'—it appears that the laddie Fairweather wasna the yin she wanted to marry ava'. Na; it was——"

But at this point her voice sank too low to be caught by any but the ear of Mrs. Baker Yellowlees, now consoled for the fumes of gin by draughts of the most appetising gossip. The nature of the communication could only be judged by the exclamations of "Ay—ay!" "D'ye say sae?" "Dear me!" "Now, that never struck me before!" And still more by the nods of speechless appreciation, and various solemn shakes of the head at the passages

most shocking to Mrs. Yellowlees' sense of decorum.

The general bearing of the information, may, however, be guessed from the first connected remark made by the baker's wife.

"Ay, ay, so she will doubtless have come here to be near him. But she is little likely to hoodwink a man like him twice. Had she siller, noo, I wadna say. Oh, the forritsomeness (forwardness) o' some women, and their presumption, it fair shames me, that it does!"

"Eh, but," said Mrs. "Polly" piously, "is it no a Guid's mercy that siccan limmers are fund oot and get nocht for their pains when a' is dune? It shows that there is a Providence abune, watching ower us."

"Aye, does it no," said Mrs. Yellowlees, with a vague consciousness that somehow she felt the better for these providential downfalls to Mina Hilliard's pride.

* * * * *

In Little Esson's studio they discussed the news very differently, but after their own fashion, always with an eye to the fact that Jerome Hilliard was, usually, lying on the second-hand sofa, and that he might or might not be able to hear what they were saying. Also Little Esson had once or twice of late manifested such an ungovernable temper, that not even the rights of hospitality could completely excuse his words.

Nevertheless, they all continued to drop in upon him, as usual—dogmatic John Glencairn, who was said to argue aloud with the dead people about the principles of art whenever he worked in the churchyard ; Fuzzy Wells, fresh from painting a new “entire” horse, ‘The Bold Buccleuch’ by name, for Andrew Banchory, the great stock-rearer of the district. He had not yet got over the strength of the potatoes with which Andrew Banchory had every evening assisted the great work, and in spite of the jibes of his companions, he, Fuzzy Wells, confined himself for the present to plain water as a beverage. There was also Hunter Mayne, more successful than of yore, a little stouter, and more rarely present among the “boys,” because he had recently installed himself in a new studio of his own, most gorgeous to behold, where he daily painted members of the best county families, and was understood to spend the rest of his time in wallowing in the yellow gold accruing therefrom.

The newest recruit of the night was a certain Marcus Frobisher, a tall youth of the bluest blood of aristocracy, who had spent enough time in the pleasant Parisian upland of Montmartre to become a violent anarchist, and who scoured the shops whenever he went to town for ties of the colour of blood. Frobisher had roomed with Hunter Mayne first abroad, and afterwards in Creelport, till such time as the latter had grown great and built a house for himself. He called

regularly on Lady Grainger, and was believed to be paying his respects to Miss Hilda.

This was the conversation which took place in Little Esson's studio, conducted at first with some attention to the uncertainty of Little Esson's temper on the one hand and on the other to the fact that Jerome Hilliard was lying on the sofa with his face buried in the pillow, a prey to mingled melancholy and dying fumes of alcohol.

"Say, fellows," exclaimed Fuzzy Wells, who was making a caricature of the way Little Esson had of stepping back every three or four strokes, and standing with his head on one side to judge the effect of his last stroke—"some of Mina's furniture came to Dickie's to-day. I saw it."

Little Esson turned sharply upon him.

"Better say Mrs. Fairweather," he said. "I've told you that before."

"Well, she always used to be Mina—wasn't she?" grumbled Fuzzy Wells. "Anyway, you needn't snap a fellow's head off."

Esson inclined his brush ever so slightly in the direction of Frobisher, who was talking to Hunter Mayne on the other tumble-down sofa at the end of the room.

"Strangers in the gallery," he murmured, so softly that only Fuzzy and John Glencairn heard him.

"Right you are, Esson," said Glencairn. "Fuzzy is an idiot. I say, what are we to do with *that*?"

With a disgustful droop of the eyelid he directed his two comrades' attention to the attitude of Jerome Hilliard prone on the nearer couch.

"He'll choke himself one of these days," said Fuzzy, "lying with his nose in the pillow!"

"And a good job, too!" sputtered John Glencairn, savagely, giving the sleeper's head a shove down with his hand as he passed on the way to examine Little Esson's picture. But Esson, with the surprising strength resident in that small thick-set body of his, easily turned the sleeper over, and arranged him with his cheek resting on the cushion.

"Why do you take so much trouble with that—*swine*?" said John Glencairn. "Why do you have him here at all? I don't believe he has ever paid a cent towards the expenses. Why don't you chuck the drunken brute to the door?"

Little Esson turned, his palette in his hand, and looked John Glencairn over from feet to head and back again.

"Oblige me," he stammered a little, as he always did when excited—"Oblige me by telling me what the—hem—hem—business it is of yours? Have *you* paid for the whiskies-and-sodas you have carried away from here every night for the last three years?"

"But it's doing you harm, Esson," argued Fuzzy Wells. "Why, only yesterday I heard that you missed a good commission—a cool hundred and fifty—to paint the presentation

portrait of Lady Partonriggs, because old Partonriggs said that he would not let his young wife (she's fifty if she's a day, with a moustache like a tom cat) go to a studio in which that fellow Hilliard was lounging about all day! It was a hunt ball presentation, too—the Southern Counties Royal Otterhounds, and you could have had quite a series of them."

"See here, you two, and any more of you that there may be," hissed Little Esson fiercely between his teeth, "this is my house, isn't it? It's built chiefly of bits of old shipwrecked brigs, I know; it's pitched without and it's tarpaulined within. The chimney is made of dashed bad stone and worse lime, and the furniture is worth, say, tuppens-ha'penny. But such as it is, it is mine. Also the loaf you are cutting a hunk off, Fuzzy, and the butter in a lordly dish you are going to lard it with—eke that siphon and whisky bottle (do try and save just a sniff for the others, John), and the cheese and the cold pie! And if it pleases me to ask Jo Cormick the poacher, and Peters the sweep, and Hutchie the sheriff's officer, it's not any business of yours, is it? Go outside and make your remarks there. There's plenty of room between here and the Isle of Man. And, as for losing your infernal hundred and fifty, and your Hunt ball presentation portraits——"

Little Esson slapped his thigh at this point in a manner expressive of the most utter contempt for all hunters and huntsmen, otters and otter-

hounds, for ladies the most sportive, and even for cheques of one hundred and fifty pounds sterling, payable to bearer.

"I want to get the bloom on this stretch of hillside right," he said. "There's not nearly enough atmosphere. If you would remove your immense carcasses out of the light so that a fellow could see, I should be grateful."

"Leave him alone with his deathless works till his temper improves," said Fuzzy. "Come on, John, let's stroll up as far as Dickie's cottage, and see what we can see, at any rate."

"I suppose you fellows are not ashamed to spy—on Terry's widow the first day she comes back?" inquired Little Esson softly, as they were going out.

"Well, the road is free to all, so far as I've heard," said Fuzzy, "and I don't see any harm in looking. Besides, if I could lend a hand at opening boxes or knocking in nails, hang it if there's anyone in the world I would sooner do it for than for Mina Hilliard!"

Something in the sound of the name seemed to reach the sleeper on the couch. Jerome Hilliard was far gone indeed, but he knew his sister's name.

"Mina," he chuckled, "time to be getting home, Mina. The old man will be after you with his stick. He doesn't whop me, though—I know too much. You should keep your eyes open, Myn."

"Faugh," grunted angrily John Glencairn.

"Think of coming back to be burdened with that. Get up, you hulking beast!"

And, on Jerome refusing to lend an ear to this advice he kicked away the half-dozen books which, in the absence of a fourth leg, supported one end of the couch, and so tumbled the sleeper forthwith on the floor.

Little Esson turned fiercely on the aggressor. He laid down his palette and advanced towards John Glencairn.

"Get out," he said, "or I'll put a palette knife into you."

Hunter Mayne and Frobisher now came forward and asked what it was all about.

"Out with you, Glencairn," cried Little Esson, fiercely. "And, what's more, don't come here again till you know how to behave yourself!"

As he spoke Jerome Hilliard raised himself on his elbow. "Say, where is Mina? I thought somebody said my sister was here a minute ago. Who dared to mention my sister's name in a mixed company? It was you, Esson. It was—I heard you. You sneered at her because she is poor. I'll show you what it is to belittle Jerome Hilliard's sister. Take that!"

And with the back of his hand he struck Little Esson hard across the face.

For a moment there was the palpitating silence which always, among men, follows a blow. Little Esson had the thin-bladed knife in his hand, and as the streaky flush followed the blow across his

pale cheek, he seemed to grip it tighter. But, quick as lightning he was on his knees beside Jerome, holding him in his arms.

"Hilliard," he said, "you know better than that. Grip yourself, man. Think what you are doing. Put that on your head—more of it on the back of your neck. It's all right. You'd better go, all you fellows. He will be all right now. I'm sorry I pitched into you, John. You'll not bear ill-will, but look in at night, as usual, eh, John? It's all my hanged temper!"

And in a few minutes Little Esson and Jerome Hilliard were left alone. On the road the expelled ones made a few remarks each to the other.

"Ever seen anyone like him?" said John Glencairn, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Fancy asking *my* pardon for having a bad temper!"

"He's a wonder," said Fuzzy Wells, with deep conviction. "God made no more like him. Broke the mould, I expect. I thought, though, he would have slain you when you kicked down the old sofa and tumbled that beast Hilliard on the floor."

"Why does he do it, think you?" mused Glencairn, humping his big, peasant's shoulder-blades up to his ears as if he found it cold. He always thought out things so.

"Blest if I know," said Fuzzy. "Can't help it, I suppose. Built that way, maybe!"

"Well, I can," said Glencairn, drooping his shoulders as suddenly. "So long, Fuzzy."

Behind them Frobisher and Hunter Mayne were walking towards the new studio.

"She's lovelier than ever, I tell you," said Frobisher. "I saw her in London. I was with the Graingers' lawyer, looking into the business of the will for the Broom Lodge people, you know. She didn't know me, of course, or look at me. I saw her when it was read. She must have tremendous self-command. When the old fellow read out that her husband had left her nothing but fifty-five pounds a year—which he could not help doing—she never so much as quivered an eyelid. I tell you, I admired her."

"Um-m-m-m!" said Hunter Mayne, "she did not always have so much self-command, as you call it. I remember——"

"What do you remember?"

"Well, never mind what, Frobisher. But you say she is prettier than ever!"

"Well, I don't know what she was before, of course. I'm a new chum here," said Frobisher; "but now she is a sight too pretty to be going round unattached with only about fifty pounds a years to live on—that's all!"

Hunter Mayne appeared to be plunged into a deep reverie. He did not respond to his companion's requests for further information, nor for a long time did he offer any opinion as to what could induce Terry Fairweather's wife to come and fix herself in a hole like Creelport.

"It's cheap—I suppose," he said at last, after

Frobisher had repeated the question four times in various forms.

"Tell me," said Mayne, waking up suddenly, "does she wear mourning?"

"No-o-o," said Frobisher: "there was something in the will about that, if I remember right. He ask her not to—in deference to the wish often expressed during life by the aforesaid Terence Fairweather"—something like that. But she wears a sort of grey dress trimmed with black, or black trimmed with grey—I forget which. Anyway, she looks like the huntress Diana in it, her of the Ephesians, you know—the wench they sculp in marble with the bow and quiver. Stunning, I tell you!"

"U-m-m!" was all that Hunter Mayne said to this, and bidding Frobisher good-night, he went slowly up the stairs of his new studio, impartially biting the twin ends of his long, blonde moustache.



CHAPTER VII.

THE BREED OF THE ITHROWARDS.

MINA FAIRWEATHER walked quietly down the New Road from the station. Then she passed along the West Shore to avoid her father's house. She had no desire thus early to encounter the napless tall hat, the tight, black frock-coat, the severely kneed trousers, and over-tight boots of damaged patent leather, which, about that hour, might usually have been seen leaving the forlorn town residence of the Hilliards of Kilterlilty, and taking the direction, either of the "Blue Lion" or that of the livery stables held by Bibby the English horse-dealer.

It was a spring morning, nippy and "bask," far on in March. A thin and icy wind whipped any puddles which were not frozen into fretful dimples, and caused the grains of sand to scour the faces of the pools which still remained iced over, till they shone like cloudy steel—a day altogether Scotch, however—the sun busy doing his work cracking the clods in the fields, and the farmers wearying for the time of the sowing and looking carefully to their seed corn.

Before Mina's arrival there had been many comings and goings between the Manse of Creelport and the little house round the corner. Indeed, though it was on the Earl's estate, the cottage known as "Dickie Dickson's" was in some sort an *appanage* of the glebe. The minister, indeed, possessed the immemorial right to veto any tenant displeasing to him. There was also an arch cut in the great, bounding, quickset hedge and a neat gate which opened into the little garden of "Dickie's," while the best part of the Manse damson plums could only be gathered from Mina's side of the march.

"Eight pounds a year I am to pay," meditated Mina, as she walked along. "That seems a good deal of rent for Creelport. But, after all, there is no other place in the town like it—retired from the road, with a little seat at the gable, from which to spy the ships away out upon the sea or the folks walking up and down the High Street. Then is there not a back way of escape to Bee and the Manse? I did well to take old Dickie's den. And then have I not got Fleckie, my ten times reliable Fleckie?"

The young widow looked up as she approached her home, raising her eyes for the first time from the ground, and saw at the door of a little rose-clambered cottage on a bank above the road a tall, raw-boned, masculine-looking woman standing.

"Are you Fleckie?" cried Mina, with some eagerness.

"I am that—juist young Fleckie Itherword," said the woman, laying an emphasis on the adjective, and smiling a broad smile, so broad there was room for no more with any safety. "Manse Lummy's ain brither's dochter. At least," she added cautiously, "I never heard ony ither weightied wi' me!"

"You are come to help me, then?" said Mina. "I am—Mrs. Fairweather!" She had hardly yet been long enough in English-speaking lands to be familiar with the sound of her name. It still tripped a little awkwardly upon her tongue.

"Save us," said the great-armed woman, "but ye are shilpit and dowie, my bairn! Yet ye are what the lads caa' bonny—at least, ye wad be if ye had had to do guid outdoor wark like me. I hae never been in a house-place before—juist plain byre-lass to Andro Banchory, and it needs one wi' some pith i' their elbows for *that* job."

"You mean," said Mina, "on account o' the heavy work?"

"I mean naething o' the kind," said the giantess. "I mean juist to haud Andro himsel' at airm's length. He's no canny—Andro Banchory. Guid peety the puir peefer o' a thing that's gane to fill my place. It'll be heard tell o', or a' be dune! But come ben, come ben. Gin I dinna do richt, I am no ower prood to be spoken till, as the cow said when they chased her oot o' the yaird after clearing the green o' the spring blanket-washin'."

Thus was Mina Fairweather equipped with a

dwelling, a garden, a serving maid, and, in short, a home of her own, at the easy rate of sixteen pounds in the year, equally divided between the Earl's rent and Fleckie Itherword's penny fee.

For some time the Creelpport folk could find little to object to in her demeanour. Even Mrs "Polly" (a contraction for policeman, not the familiar diminutive for Mary) grew "disjaskit," because, with all her mystery she could find out nothing to Mina's discredit, even after hiding for four hours shivering behind the dyke opposite Dickie's cottage. She had seen a woman—big and strong as a horse, she said, come to the door and throw a pail of soap-suds over the dyke as easily as if it had been a cup of tea. Part of the contents drenched the hidden Mrs. "Polly," and her gossips, disappointed of news, affirmed to her face that they were sorry. But afterwards, and to each other, they said it served her right for spying upon a poor young thing that had been left so recently a widow.

So Mina went and came quietly, steadily, her eyes on the ground, living plainly and paying for everything over the counter as she got it. Her simple dress of grey and black was considered, even by ill-wishers like Mrs. "Polly," as "mair in keeping" with Mina's situation than "great horses' tails o' crape," after which, without doubt (so that lady affirmed) Mina's soul was secretly lusting. But then her man "had forbidden it in his will, puir thing. Aye, he kenned weel that

there would be no mourning for him in her heart."

"Aweel," said Mrs. Baker Yellowlees, "for me I hae naething to say again the lass. She has been oor customer frae the verra first day, and when I said to her, kindly like, that she wad dootless get her siller frae the lawyers twice in the year, and that if she paid her book by the quarter or even the half-year, it would suit James and me weel eneuch, what do you think the lassie answered?"

"Dod, but I hae nae guess at that," said Mrs. "Polly," vaguely uneasy.

"She answered that she preferred to pay ready siller, if it was the same to us—that she had seen muckle ill come o' lang reckonings, but never nane o' payments down on the nail. May I never sell a penny bap again if I dinna wish there were mair folk like her!"

Bitterly Mrs. "Polly" felt the innuendo.

"It will be her pride and poverty that gars her to do it," she said; "and maybe the thocht how her man disgraced her by leavin' the bulk of the siller awa' frae her to his friends, the Broom Lodge folk."

"Broom Lodge, indeed, and my Leddy Grainger," cried Mrs. Yellowlees, snapping her fingers. "*Pach*—that for them and their gentilities! I could show you a page in our books that wad surprise ye. Broom Lodge, indeed! No' but what James will get his siller richt eneuch,

or ken the reason wherefore. But it's a sair fash to be aye ask-asking, and aye sorn-sornin', and aye beg-beggin', for what is your ain hard-earned siller ! ”

Thus Mina's behaviour and the reserve with which she conducted herself were gaining her favour in unexpected quarters. Nevertheless, there were bitter drops in her cup. There was but one in all Creelport to whom her heart was drawn in these first days of her home coming. Yet when she spoke to Miss Bee of her late husband she encountered a strange and chilling silence.

“ At first when Terence died,” she said to this confident, “ it seemed as if all the cords about my heart had been cut. It weighed me down. It felt as hard and as heavy as——”

“ As a channel-stane,” suggested Miss Bee. “ Little wonder, poor lass—left all by yourself to face poverty in a foreign land.”

“ Ah, Bee,” said Mina, her face taking on that infinitely soft expression it always had when she spoke of Terry, “ it is not as you think. If it had not been for some settlements that were to be made in Paris before I came home—business that kept me hard at it from morning till night—I think I should have gone mad.”

Miss Bee nodded a little drily. Mina, however, did not notice this.

“ There never was anyone so good as Terry, dear Bee,” she continued, laying her head on

the broad and comfortable shoulder of the minister's sister ; " he loved me long before, you know—only he never dared to speak of it. He thought—that is—well, I was foolish. And now it seems a thousand years since I used to run in and out among the ' boys ' in my brother's studio. But not one of them loved me like Terry——"

" Well, there was one that I knew of——" began Miss Bee, but Mina stopped her with a start and a scared lift of her head from its resting place.

" Oh, never speak of him—please ! Bee—I cannot bear it." she said.

Miss Bee's clear grey eye divined at once that Mina understood one thing, while she meant another. But she only answered, with a sigh, " Perhaps it will be as well."

There was a long pause in the little parlour which Mina's taste and simple means had already made so prettily characteristic. Her thoughts went back once more to Terry, as indeed they mostly did now. She had not yet begun to look forward or make plans. She was content just to exist.

" If only I had loved him more," she murmured, with her brow down again on Bee's shoulder ; " *he* loved me so much ! "

" I wish he had shown it more then," said Miss Bee sharply. " I have no patience with him, Mina, leaving all his money to those Broom Lodge——" here she paused to think of a word,

and finding none, concluded her sentence lamely with — “these *women*,” but pronounced in a tone of voice very unlike the usual warm-hearted, impulsive Miss Bee of Dr. John’s Manse.

Mina lifted her head and stared, hardly taking in the meaning of the words.

“You are not angry with my poor Terry,” she said. “Oh, no, not that !”

Miss Bee threw back her head with something of Dr. John’s action in the pulpit when he denounced the sins particularly abhorrent to him—such as evil-speaking, ill-will among neighbours, and spiritual pride.

“Terence Fairweather’s money was his own,” said Miss Bee determinedly ; “there was no need to leave it away from you. Besides (what is the use of hiding it ?), there was worse—selling out stock and giving it away while he was alive, so as to leave you poor !”

“Bee, he never did !” Mina uttered the words, but she blushed as she herself heard them. For the first time she understood that she could not possibly explain the truth. She was bound by her promise to Terry, by her oath sworn only a minute or two before he died.

Miss Bee nodded her head doggedly.

“Well, Mina, of course it is good and sweet of you to love him—or even to *think* that you do,” pursued Miss Bee ; “but there is one thing, dear—the way you have been treated absolves you, in

the opinion of all right-thinking people, from the duty of remaining long a widow."

"Bee!"

"Mina!"

"I forbid you to speak to me like that!"

"Oh, very well," said Miss Bee cheerily, "I shall not need to say it again. You will know that I am thinking it."

"Oh, Bee," said Mina, suddenly beginning to cry, as the impossibility of making people think well of her Terry presented itself for the first time to her mind, "you will be sorry one day for saying these things about Terry Fairweather. If I could only tell you what he was to me——"

"Yes," said Miss Bee, acidly, "and to those Broom Lodge women. Oh, don't tell me!"

"Do you want to get rid of me?" demanded Mina suddenly, a curious fire coming into her eyes, the same which had been there the night of the scene in the studio. But Miss Bee, a woman wise in her generation, was quick to recognise a danger signal. She put out her hand and drew Mina towards her.

"There," she said repentently, "kiss your old jealous Bee. You shall say whatever you like about your Terry; only keep on loving me. He was an angel of light, and indeed I am grateful to him. For, if he had left you a rich woman you would have stopped on in London, where you would have married a peer of the realm, and never looked near your poor old Bee or her brother,

Dr. John. And it's ever so much nicer to have that hole in the quickset hedge, and to be able to run in and out every half-hour to make sure that you and Fleckie Itherword are behaving yourselves. Besides, Lummy has been in a perfect heaven of a temper ever since her niece came to Dickie's cottage. Is Fleckie happy, think you?"

"Well," smiled Mina, "as to that I cannot tell. She says she has not nearly enough work, and wants me to find out if I cannot get a cow's grass from the Earl. But I say to Fleckie, 'Where would the cow come from in that case.' I think she proposes to steal me one of her old master's, judging by the determined way she laughs and shakes her head."

"If her heart is set on it," said Miss Bee, laughing, "look out then. I know the black Itherword breed!"

"It seems the only thing that will keep her from wearing away the Earl's house altogether by scrubbing and holy-stoning, washing and scouring and polishing. Fleckie vowed to-day that if there had not been a brass knocker on the front door, she did not know that she could have stayed!"

"Brass knockers need cleaning after every shower!" said Miss Bee, nodding approvingly.

"Then I asked her," continued Mina, "why she did not go and help her aunt at the Manse, where there was so much to be done. And she said, 'Because I dinna want my head broke! Lummy

bade me never leave your hoose, mem, nicht or day, till ye were married—or I was dead!’ ”

Mina smiled faintly as she reported Lummy’s orders to her niece. Then she continued. “ You good Samaritans at the Manse, both Lummy and her mistress, are very eager to provide for me, I think. Even Fleckie won’t protect me. I asked her if she was afraid of her aunt.”

“ And what did she say ? ” interrupted Miss Bee.

“ Oh, she just said, ‘ So wad ye be feared o’ Lummy if you was me ! Has she no’ the family Bible wi’ the names and ages o’ a’ the Itherwords in her kist up the stair ? And, faith, she dared me, that if I didna gie satisfaction and do what she telled me, that she wad alter the figures and mak’ me oot twenty year aulder than I am. And ye ken yoursel’, Miss Mina, that that wad never do for a young unmarried woman like me ! ’ ”



CHAPTER VIII.

FLECKIE POLISHES THE SILVER.

THE various coteries which composed genteel Creelport clicked on their way as if run by well-oiled clockwork. For the most part they had almost ceased to occupy themselves with the affairs of Mina Fairweather, when something happened which briskly renewed their interest.

Mina's father, Claude Hilliard, "got converted."

There could be no doubt about the matter. And the marvel was something more than a nine days' one. He had even appeared on the platform of Amen Hall and stated the case himself. He had also prayed for his two rebellious children, whom he furthermore stated his intention of forgiving in the most Christian spirit. To clinch the matter, he announced his intention of giving up his great barn of a family residence in the West Borough, which (at someone else's expense) was to be "converted" into a spiritual gymnasium or wrestling home, where all those whose hearts were "moved," could meet together to pray for the Hardened and the Unregenerate

of their several families. These were to be mentioned by name and their failings specified, and those who knew Creelport best foresaw trouble in the suggestion—as also some interest for outsiders.

It is hardly needful to say that Claude Hilliard's "change of heart" had not been the work of any of the regular ecclesiastical organisations, or even of the recognised missions connected with the Creelport churches. A strolling evangelist, appearing from nowhere in particular had called on the owner of Amen Hall—a prominent grocer in the town, whom the refusal of a spirit licence, through the joint efforts of Dr. John and the other ministers had driven into antagonism to all recognised means of grace.

Several meetings, presided over by Mr. Jeelypiece, the owner of the aforesaid hall, had been held. Mr. Simon Broolie's addresses had been advertised under names which were but imperfectly described as stirring. Such were "Ten to One on Hell!" This, being interpreted, expressed Mr. Jeelypiece's actuarial estimate of the chances of salvation among the Creelportians. But, as he explained later at some of Simon Broolie's meetings, he might just as well have said "ninety-nine to one," because "the hopeless spiritual deadness" of the place opened itself out to him day by day. Here Mr. Jeelypiece groaned, and shook his head as he thought of Dr. John and the refusal of his spirit licence.

A second notice, promulgated largely on the walls of the harbour, and in smaller bills stuck along the lanes, also (secretly by night) on the doors of prominent "Sadducees"—such as the ministers and all church office-bearers—proclaimed as its subject, "Church-going a Deadly Sin!" Yet another entitled, "Confess with your Mouths," caused the profane to scoff. While that which proved efficacious in the interesting case of Mr. Claude Hilliard was headed, in the largest double pica and in flaming red, "The Judgment Seat To-morrow!"

Dr. John shuddered and turned away, ever saying a prayer when these announcements faced him from the walls of his own quiet parish. He was ashamed, as if someone had done an abominable act in the sanctuary. He felt hot and angry, as if he had been buffeted on the cheek, as often as Mr. Simon Broolie's posters met his eye. After seeing the last mentioned he went and climbed the Lincoln's Hill before he went home again. He wanted somehow to breathe clean air and to look upon the quiet works of a God who works quietly.

But yet, deny it who dared, Claude Hilliard, alone of all Creelpport, was a changed man by the efforts of that single-handed evangelist, Mr. Simon Broolie. Into the face of ministers and office-bearers, elders and deacons, in the face even of well rooted "bodies," such as the "Brethren" and the Salvation Army, Claude nightly flung himself like a taunt. What they, with their organisations

and their staffs of workers, their street preachings and their private "means of grace," had been unable to do in thirty years, an ordinary, unpretending man, depending for his livelihood on the nightly collections (Mr. Hilliard hoped they would be liberal) had effected. The "Blue Lion" knew him no more. He occupied no longer his wonted seat in the bar parlour of the "Three Sea Dogs," where Antiquary Jamie (that sorely lost man!) continued to tell his unhallowed tales.

Claude Hilliard had not only been converted, but he seemed resolved that everyone else should hear of it. It was in the course of this mission, which he proclaimed publicly in Amen Hall, that he appeared for the first time one afternoon in April at his daughter's door. He wore, as it seemed, the same suit as always, the same boots, tie and hat—all a little shabbier, a little more pretentious, if possible, than of yore. He carried, in addition, a rosette compounded of blue and white and red, fraught with mystic meanings and esoteric perfections, in his buttonhole.

It was Fleckie Itherword who opened the door. She was encased in a tight robe, made over from one of Lummy's. The garment was ribbed like an umbrella where the pleats had been let out, the gathers dispersed, and the "fulling" utilised to the very selvages to provide additional accommodation. Various V-shaped designs at the waist were filled in with foreign matter, and the final result was a sort of patchwork quilt, which the

proud Fleckie imagined to be the latest thing in afternoon attire. From two very short and tight sleeves the red hands of the ex-byre-lass hung down like those of a terra-cotta statue much larger than life size.

"Be good enough to say to Mrs. Fairweather—my daughter—that her father desires to speak with her."

"The mistress is no' in the hoose," said Fleckie firmly.

"Then she will be at the Manse," said Mr. Claude Hilliard, who studied habits. "I will come in and wait in the parlour. Be good enough to tell her I am here."

And he made as if to enter, but the huge figure of the dairy-lass resolutely barred the door.

"Na," she said, "I hae heard how ye gied my auntie the begunk (cheat) at the Manse, but ye'll no try your tricks wi' Fleckie Itherword. Certes, no! This is a hoose that I hae been pitten in charge o', and I promised, before I gied in my notice to Andro Banchory, that I wad quit it neither by day nor nicht, as lang as my mistress was a single woman. Gin ye hae a message, leave it, and be gaun. For into this hoose ye dinna come, sae lang as this wee nieve sticks to this wee airm."

And Fleckie shook the fist of a heavy-weight prize-fighter immediately under Mr. Claude Hilliard's nose.

It chanced, however, by ill-luck, that just then Mina came out of the little gate which opened

manseward through the quickset hedge. She turned pale at the sight of the man on her threshold, and would have shrunk back. But her father approached her hastily with his hand outstretched.

"Mina," he said, in a strained throat voice contracted upon the platform at Amen Hall, "I have experienced a change at heart, and it is my heart's dearest wish to deliver my children also from the degrading bondage of that iniquity which has held their father so long."

The girl was trembling, and when Claude Hilliard came near, as if to take her in his arms on the spot, she drew back with a little cry of horror, which brought the sympathetic Fleckie instantly to her side.

"Will I *mell* him?" she said, looking anxiously at her mistress for directions. "Juist say the word! My auntie Lummy bade me be on the lookoot for a lang-leggit loon gye like this yin."

Mina faintly shook her head, and finally she was able to command herself so far as to bid her father enter the house and there to speak anything that he had got to say. But even thus, so strong was her physical loathing for the man, that she could not help keeping the willing Fleckie between her and her father as they entered the little cottage.

Greatly to Claude Hilliard's disgust, and also to the no little astonishment of her mistress, Fleckie persisted in accompanying father and daughter into the sitting-room of Dickie's cottage.

Nor would she go out even at the request of her mistress.

"Na," she said simply, "Lummy and Miss Bee bade me no to leave ye, at any time when ye might need me, nicht or day. And, faith, by the look o' this carl, I'm thinkin' that ye micht need me sharp and sair. Forbye, Fleckie has e'en in her head, mistress, and she can see that ye are no so very proud to be seein' him ava'. As likely as no he will be seekin' siller aff ye. Na, na, mem, Fleckie Itherword has been kenned a' her life for a still tongue. She never spak' a word o' her mistress's affairs—or even her maister, Andro Banchory's, great hullion that he was. Say your say, the twa o' ye, and while ye are at your talks, I'll juist be giein' a bit clean to the bonny silver knives and forks in the drawer here."

With these words Fleckie established herself on her knees before the only armchair, so that Claude Hilliard had to be content with a corner of the little couch, while his daughter, not deigning to sit down, stood by the mantelpiece, her hat in her hand, waiting for her father to reveal his business.

Mr. Claude had a certain difficulty in breaking the ice. There was, it must be admitted, a good deal of ice to break.

"I hope you do not bear any malice for the past," he said at last ; "ill-feeling in families is a sin against God and man. You have heard that I have given up my house to be a gathering-place

of those desirous of awakening their hard-hearted relatives, without the interference of time-serving priests or lukewarm ministers."

"I have heard," said Mina coldly. It did not seem to be her own voice that was speaking.

"Well, Mina," continued Claude Hilliard, a little more easily, and hastening on to his real business, "I was sorry to hear that your husband used you so ill—after—after all you had given up for him. It was not what I should have expected of Terence Fairweather; and, indeed, I may say, if you had consulted *me*, I should have insisted at the time that matters should have been arranged quite differently. I would have used my parental authority. I had, I flatter myself, some influence with the young man—and then a father can always arrange such things better——"

"If you have anything to say," broke in his daughter, with difficulty restraining herself, "say it and be gone!"

"Begone? My child speaks thus to me! Begone!" cried the fond parent, deeply astonished and hurt. "Did my ears hear aright? I came with the olive branch, and is this my answer? Ungrateful girl; but"—here he heaved a deep sigh—"indeed, what better heart was in my own breast only a short month ago. Ah, you have yet to make the acquaintance of that blessed man, Mr. Simon Broolie, and then, with a wave of his hand, he will change your evil spirit as he has changed mine!"

Again Mina showed manifest signs of impatience, and the huge guardian angel, laying a fork on the sideboard, looked up to her mistress wistfully, as if pleading for instructions.

"But affliction has, I trust, softened you, and the society of the blessed Messenger of Awakening will complete what has been begun. It was, you will be astonished to hear, chiefly for *your* sake that I gave up my house in the West Borough."

At this truly astounding piece of information Mina looked up hastily.

"Yes," continued her father, "I, too, have known sorrow and disappointment. I also have struggled with too narrow means. I believe—I am led to believe that you have a spare bedroom in this house. It is small, of course—not what I have been accustomed to—but it is the day of small things with me, and for your soul's sake, Mina, I consent to accept it. I will share your poverty with you, Mina. It is, besides, not at all fitting that a young lady, the daughter of Claude Hilliard, and a scion of the ancient house of Kilterlilty, should live thus alone. People are censorious. Tongues wag; but with a father to protect you, to care for you with all the depth of a recently sanctified affection——"

Mina held up her hand imperiously.

"That will do," she said; "you are in my house. This once, but never again, do you enter! You forget, sir—I have tasted your affection—I shall

bear the marks on my body to the grave. And as for censorious tongues, you know on whose account these have followed me all my life. I do not fear them now—less now than ever! They have done their worst!”

He began again.

“Have you forgot the Fifth Commandment, ‘Honour thy father——’?”

“Ah,” said Mina, with sudden bitterness, “I have no father, I never had a father. I only remember a butcher, a sot, a cruel tyrant. On the earth I never knew a father. I own no obligation to the mad dog that bit me. Yet, in spite of all, I would not quite forget what you might have been. You have wasted your children’s bread, yet will I not see you starve. But it shall be done in my own time and way. I bid you good-bye here and now. I desire never to look upon your face again!”

Whereupon Claude Hilliard, forgetting his recent change of heart, was beginning to curse his daughter in words and phrases more appropriate to the “Three Sea Dogs” than to Amen Hall. But Fleckie Itherword, rising so suddenly that she seemed to fill the whole end of the room, opened the door for him, and motioned him to pass out with a wave of the arm which burst a seam of the refitted dress from elbow to armpit.

“And keep a civil tongue in your head, my mannie,” she counselled him. “I hae handled muckle Andro Banchory when he was rampin’ in



“ ‘ And keep a civil tongue in your head, my mannie.’ ”

Little Esson.]

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his corruption like a three-year-auld. And I could juist find it in my heart to mak' champit pitaties o' a speldron like you—ay, and never breathe mysel' at the job!"

Thus was Claude Hilliard broken on the rock of his daughter's resolve, and the flintiness of her heart furnished matter for many telling personal applications delivered under the zinc roof of Amen Hall.

And when the local banker wrote to Claude Hilliard, Esq., late of Kilterlilty, that a client (who desired that his name should be kept a secret) had placed twenty pounds to his (the said Claude Hilliard's) account, and had furthermore intimated through a London agent that the same would be continued quarterly during his lifetime, in remembrance of ancient ties now broken, Claude carried the letter about everywhere, contrasting the heaven-sent liberality of the unknown donor with the cruel behaviour of his undutiful daughter, Mina Fairweather.

And several people, even some good people, felt that, though doubtless a great and manifest sinner, Claude Hilliard was now being hardly used.

Nevertheless, Mina, safe under the wrathful wing of Fleckie, and watched over maternally by Miss Bee, continued to walk in the ways of quietness, in those blessed days when over the sea from the south came the first warm airs of summer.



CHAPTER IX.

THE PRIDE OF " PITCH-AND-TOSS."

Now the world which the artists had created for themselves in Creelport-on-Dee was quite another world. Indeed, it might have been in a different planet, save for the vague ties of accounts more or less regularly settled at Yellowlees the baker's, Pinson the butcher's, and with Davie Sloan the coal-merchant at the goods-station yard.

At this period the Creelport people felt no pride in " thae penter bodies," and turned away their heads in shame when complimented on the presence among them of a distinguished artistic colony. The cast-iron foot-bridge recently erected across to the tweedmills on the Kirkanders shore, the sanitary arrangements of the new Board School, and the red-brick, model stables erected by the enterprising firm of Bibby & Co., horse-dealers and livery-stable keepers (an eyesore far and near) were the true source of civic pride to the inhabitants of the ancient burgh of Creelport. Not artistic fame, but a new auction mart, the provost declared,

was the crying need of the town. And he carried the popular voice with him.

The artists, on the contrary, resented Bibby's abortion in red brick, and manœuvred their easels to keep the iron bridge out of their pictures ; but on the whole they let the Creelport world wag along the way it would, contented with themselves and their accommodation—as much apart from Creelport's everyday world, as, say, the early Christians in the Catacombs, chanting their hymns, while over their heads rolled the turmoil and pother of Imperial Rome.

To them, or at least to some of them, Mina's return was less of a problem and an astonishment. *They* understood her desire for quiet. They understood, or thought they did, how it was that Terry Fairweather had forgotten to alter his will after he married. Not one of them, except, perhaps, Hunter Mayne, ever thought of making a will. As Little Esson said, "When a fellow drops, what does it matter who gets his colour box and traps ?"

But it was vivid of heart and quick of sympathy, that little turps-smelling colony. Its members let Mina alone for some months after her arrival. They even forgave her going so often to church, putting it down (with large-minded tolerance) to her recent bereavement. They did not go there themselves. Church was a barren place. The paint on the walls never harmonised with the velvet cushions of the pulpit, and the pews all

ran so evenly—it was enough to debauch a fellow's drawing for a whole week. Besides, the women were mostly old, and the men persistently bald-headed. Also the hour of service in Creelport, half-past eleven, was indecently early for Sunday morning.

Little Esson indeed went sometimes on the sly, but this was understood and overlooked, on the score of a long (and not unproductive) friendship for Miss Bee and Dr. John.

But, though not greatly church-going, the heart of the little artistic set was good and loyal and kind—far more Christian in spirit, indeed, in spite of current eccentricities, than many communities of far more rigid pretensions. They were neither Pharisees nor Sadducees. Appreciation of the good and the genuine was quick and sure among them. Especially they were great on “making allowances.” If anyone “went wrong,” man or woman, they knew exactly how it had happened, and not only never threw the first stone, but carefully covered up all the obvious stone-heaps along the sinner's way, so that others less charitable might find as little ammunition as possible.

As Dr. John himself said, “They were far from bad lads, with a good deal of misapplied religion running to seed among them.”

For one thing (and it helps us to understand them) these young fellows, careless and flighty as they were, and apt to be disorganised by the

mere flutter of a petticoat, established a sort of board of control, as soon as it was known that Mina was coming back to Creelport. It was Little Esson with his long head, that genius with the soft, womanish, brown eyes, who had suggested Fleckie Itherword to Miss Bee. It was that head-strong, dogmatic "cowp-the-cart," John Glencairn, who arranged the steady policing of Jerome Hilliard, so that it was many weeks before his sister ever set eyes upon him.

And this was no easy matter either. It belonged to the nature of things that Jerome Hilliard was at bitter variance with his father. He was making no money, or very little. Terry Fairweather could not buy his pictures any more, and it was, he averred, all nonsense about Myn being left poor. He knew better. Mina and he had always been good friends. She was alone. It was her duty, therefore, to share her home with him. As long as he, Jerome Hilliard, lived, his sister should not want the support and protection which only a loving brother can afford.

But Little Esson, who suffered him (with a great suffrance) to lie upon the shakedown which he, Esson, regularly made up on the floor in the corner of the studio, resolved that he would push Mr. Jerome Hilliard over the embankment down by the quay some dark night when the tide was high, rather than have on his soul the guilt of blood by leaving Mina to face Jerome's nightly return.

In brief, so well did they police Master Jerome night and day, that for months he never walked the streets without an armed guard on either side of him. When he entered a room a bolt was pushed behind him, and the key had to be fished out of somebody's trouser-pocket before he could get out again.

Somehow or other it happened that the colony had news of Mina nearly every day, for, after all, Creelport is a small place. But with a delicacy which did them, as Dr. John said, infinite honour, they refrained from reclaiming her as a relapsed member of their jovial fellowship. It was clearly not to be thought of, that Mina, so lately a widow, young, beautiful, and full of life, with such a father and such a brother, should run in and out of studios, as she had done when she was a girl in short frocks.

Esson it was who put this with great force and clearness. The others assented with some reluctance. First, said Esson, let Mina establish herself with good friends of her own, such as she would meet with at the Manse of Dr. John—and then, why, they would see.

"Very well for you, you humbug, Esson," said John Glencairn, "you who have been a favourite with Miss Bee ever since she nursed you through that sham fever of yours. You can sneak up there whenever you like—but how about the rest of us?"

In speaking of these grave deliberations, let it

be understood that Hunter Mayne and his friend Frobisher were not now members of the gang. They had quite separated from the "boys," strictly so called. Perhaps it was because they desired to put away childish things, perhaps for other reasons. At any rate, his new studio and a new circle of friends made Hunter Mayne a comparatively rare visitor at the old "Pitch-and-Toss," as Esson's studio was called, from the odour of tar which pervaded it, as well as from the life-on-the-ocean-wave which its building materials had previously led.

When Mayne and Frobisher went visiting of an evening, it was reported credibly that they mostly found themselves at Broom Lodge, where Miss Hilda Grainger and a young college friend instructed them in Conic Sections. But this, like most Creelpport histories, was almost certainly devoid of foundation.

As John Glencairn had not obscurely hinted, Esson did indeed first meet Mina Fairweather face to face within the hospitable drawing-room of the Manse. The others had held by their engagements. They had been content to lift their hats to Mina, but a faint, pale smile and a slight bow had hitherto been the extent of their recompense. Generally, indeed, the responsibility of Jerome, and the necessity of "bullying" him down a side street, upon catching a glimpse of that slender figure in green and black far up the sunlit road, had given them enough to

occupy their minds so long as Mina remained in view.

The conspirators, in addition to Fuzzy Wells, John Glencairn, and Esson, now included Tom MacBrayne, otherwise called "Father Prout," because of his years and sturdy beard, and two new-comers, the brothers Barnetson. These all took shares in the "Mina Fairweather Protection Society, Limited." Esson was, of course, chief organiser, Fuzzy Wells the society's conscience in the decision of doubtful questions of right and wrong; while John Glencairn was king's justicer, vituperator, jailor, and occasionally executioner. The juniors did as Esson and the others bade them—except, that is, old "Father Prout," who did so also, because he was lazy and it was too much trouble to contradict the "boys."

The conspiracy worked to a marvel, and without very much jealousy. Perhaps this was because all the fellows, except Esson and old "Prout," had certain little private "affairs" of their own on tap, at different stages of interest, though Mina remained to all of them at once a divinity and a cult.

With Hunter Mayne and his satellite Frobisher, it was, of course, different. But we will come to them presently. Creelport is not a metropolis, but its population is just as varied and interesting, besides being a good deal more easily classified. What Hunter Mayne thought about Mrs. Terence Fairweather and why he thought it, deserves a

chapter to itself—indeed, several. But Creelport is a leisurely place, and its chronicles may well be so also.

Little Esson met Mina in Miss Bee's drawing-room, and by consequence Mina met Little Esson. So far they were equal. But Mina had not known, whereas Little Esson had colloqued with Miss Bee several times immediately before, and had watched with a battered opera-glass from his studio roof till he had seen Mina clear the arch of quickset on her way to the Manse. Then, just a little ashamed of the opera-glass, and taking a back street to escape the sharp eyes of John Glencairn, Esson hastened through the white gate and presented himself at the front door of the Manse.

Men's emotions may look after themselves. This history follows the more attractive feelings of Mina. The real interest of life consists of what women feel and what men do in consequence:

"Mr. Esson!" exclaimed Mina, shrinking back a little by instinct, with a faint moistening of the eyelashes produced by the thought of Terry, then suddenly and impulsively holding out both her hands, "I did not know—that—that you were here. I have not seen anyone—belonging to the studios since I came back."

And as she spoke the pattern on the old thread-bare carpet which covered the model's daïs, appeared before her eyes, plain to be seen. She smelled the fragrance of ancient bars of soap which would persist, in spite of frequent swabbings

with *eau-de-Cologne*, in disengaging itself from the interstices of the throne on which Hunter Mayne had painted her as a Venetian flower-girl, and Esson in a score of studies, each more dainty than the other.

Thinking of these things, the dark eyes of misty violet, into which Esson had looked so often—for purely professional reasons, he told himself—grew yet more vaporous, till they seemed millions of millions of miles away from him. What was she thinking? Not of him, at any rate. Esson knew that very well, and, indeed, expected nothing better.

And Mina—well, the truth was that her early youth had come back strongly to her. Even the image of Terry receded. A woman may throw overboard a lifetime at a sudden call of the heart. But that is when there is a man she loves in the question. Yet, once left alone, the earlier years swiftly wipe out the later, and she becomes again very much what she was before, tempered, it may be, by knowledge and experience.

Mina had feared and hated her father, never having known the smallest reason for doing anything else. She had avoided and distrusted her brother. All the kindnesses of her life had been shown her by strangers—chiefly by that little rough-and-ready colony of artist lads. But—she had always cared most for Hunter Mayne. That was different. He had been good to her as a little child, indulgent when she grew to be a

romping girl, protective at the awkward corner of life just before she found out how easily she could queen it among men. Yes, what use to deny it—once she had loved him, and now, sitting in the parlour of the Manse with Dr. John beaming upon her, mildly golden-spectacled, with Miss Bee bustling round the tea-table, and Little Esson adoring her like a goddess with his big brown eyes, she was still thinking of Hunter Mayne, and (shame upon her !) trying to invent excuses for him.

"You are like a Quakers' meeting," cried Miss Bee, hurrying in with a flutter of homely skirts. "Why, what has come over you all?"

"I think we are enjoying the peace of this delightful room and resting our eyes with gazing on the sea," said Dr. John, who, dwelling in a continual atmosphere of peace, judged that all others were as fond of silence as himself.

"You could have held your tongues and gazed at the sea without coming to my drawing-room to do it," retorted Miss Bee. "Come, Esson, have you nothing to tell us? They say you are so witty. Be witty!"

Esson, thus called upon, could only smile feebly, and ask who had been telling lies about him.

"Oh," snapped Miss Bee, "I understand—it is for men that you keep your clever things; you don't think us worthy of them. But at any rate, we can nurse people who have brain fever, and we know a lot about them ever after—so there's for you, Mr. Archibald Esson."

The tea achieved itself with the proper amount of pleasant small talk, Mina joining in, even reaching out to a description of the methods of Fleckie Itherword.

"Fleckie," she said, in answer to a question, "is never quite sure that she is not at her old work in the byre. Fleckie forgets. When she dusts the parlour chairs of a morning, she gives each of them a slap to make them stand over to the other side of their stalls."

"You even caught her trying to milk a three-legged stool, didn't you?" suggested Little Esson, with a twinkle in his brown eyes, which recalled the dear, foolish give-and-take of the old studio to Mina's aching heart.

"Not quite that," she answered, smiling a little; "but she does call 'Hurley-Hurley-Hurley,' to the chickens, when she wants to shut them up for the night. You know I have begun to keep hens—eggs at a penny under shop-rate, Mr. Esson, and warranted fresh-laid!"

"I will take them all," said Miss Bee; "that is, if you will promise me to come here and eat three a day, and a chicken every night to supper. You look as if you wanted a whole poultry farm, my dear!"

And she patted the girl's cheek, which, indeed, had not regained its colour of the old days. Mina looked up at Miss Bee with the arch expression of one who is about to risk a speech which she knows she ought not to make.

"The Manse of Creelport," she said, "is like Peter's sheet that was let down from heaven by the four corners, wherein were all manner of four-footed things, beasts of the earth and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air."

Then from his corner Dr. John congratulated Mina on her accurate knowledge of, at least, the letter of Scripture, and said that if she would only eat out of their sheet, and do them credit by her appearance, Lummy could be depended upon to do the killing.

Which was certainly an astonishing remark for Dr. John ; but then, as Miss Bee said, no men whatsoever were quite themselves when Mina was in the room.

"And are we never to see you again in the old place—Mrs.—eh—Fairweather?" Little Esson achieved his speech, when Dr. John had resumed his study of the distant band of blue sea, cut midway by the twin brown streaks of the estuary sands and the mudbanks through which the Dee carried its vaguely navigable channel to the sea.

Meanwhile, Miss Bee, who had learned (a great lesson) when to be out of the way, was insulting Lummy, who smiled openly in her face, with certain instructions held unnecessary by that functionary.

"It's no worth your pains," said Lummy, pointing over her shoulder with a jerk of her thumb ; "ye can gang ben and bide there. *Yon's no the lad!*"

"I will thank you to hold your tongue, Lummy," said Miss Bee sharply; "and do not meddle with what does not concern you."

"Aweel," said Lummy, "I'll try. But when ye come in here to my pantry and spend ten minutes tellin' me, Lummy Itherword, how to set a tea-table, and how to push in the chairs, Lord, sirs, the verra Apostle Paul himsel' couldna help thinkin'."

Profiting by the quiet of the room and the gentle look in the eyes of the girl in black, Little Esson proffered his request, adding, "It has been lonely ever since—nobody except old Betty Lookower who comes on Saturdays to clean us up a bit, and some little girls I wanted for a nut-gathering picture——"

"I was the last she-slip to stand upon the soap boxes, I suppose?" said Mina, smiling more like her old self.

"And the pictures?" she went on; "you march, I hear, from success to success."

"Very likely," said Esson with a grimace; "but successes, like curses, sometimes come home to roost. It has been a good year for painting, but a bad one for selling. Most of our immortal works are back in the studio with their faces to the wall. But the frames come in handy!"

"Yes, I understand," said Mina, with a quick look of comradeship which comes from living where poverty is the common lot.

"But we rub along," said Esson, hastening to

make as little as possible of the difficulties of the colony, the members of which, like the early Christians, had most things in common; "we are still smoking bird's-eye!"

"I remember your rule," said Mina, actually smiling brightly; "when you get to your last half-crown, spend it on Egyptian cigarettes!"

A glow of satisfaction warmed Little Esson's breast. She was talking a little, seemed glad to recall old things. The world was not quite lived out for her—nor, perhaps, for the little colony at "Pitch-and-Toss." Jerome Hilliard was what bothered him, but that problem he would think out later. If nothing better occurred, they would send him out to sea in a herring smack with the Barnetson brothers to take care of him.

At any rate, the fate of Mina's brother was a question for discussion in conclave. What Esson had to do at present was to wile their "Pride" back among them. "Pitch-and-Toss" had never been the same since Terry Fairweather carried her off. There were other girls in Creelport, it was true, but they were so far inferior to Miss Hilliard that a fellow only used to walk with them if he couldn't have Mina.

"Well," said the girl at last, "perhaps if Miss Bee will go with me I will come so far to see the pictures."

"Nay," said Miss Bee promptly; "you are the married woman. It is you who must chaperon

me! I am not going to venture among these gay young blades on any other footing."

At this they all laughed, and Mina was soon full of the gossip of the "Painters' Camp." Only the ready Esson never mentioned either Hunter Mayne or her brother Jerome.

When Little Esson entered the big, black-beamed studio with its wide built-on chimney that night, he was not well received.

"You are a pretty fellow," began John Glencairn, aggressively; "you're Coventried, d'ye hear? You're quodded! I wondered what was up when I saw you sneak past my place like Brer Fox off to the nearest chicken coop. And spying up on the roof with these tumbler bottoms of yours done up in leather—ugh, Esson, you are really too much of a sweep even for kicking!"

"Shut up, man," cried Esson, "you interminable, rasping, ungreased barrow-wheel. Why, when you were grouching and growling here, I was doing the best day's work for old 'Pitch-and-Toss' that has ever been done—since we lost her!"

"What? What? What? Out with it!" Half a dozen voices bade him "stand and deliver."

"Shan't, unless you apologise," said Esson, planting himself firmly before the fire—"Glencairn, I mean."

"Shan't! See him—see him further, first!" cried Glencairn.

"Pound him!" shouted the others. "You pound, and we'll hold him!" cried Wells and the

Barnetson brothers together. But John Glencairn seized a long pole with a spike on one end of it, which was used for arranging windows and skylight blinds.

"If a man-jack of you touches me," he cried, "I swear I'll put this plunk through the middle of 'April Smiles!'"

This was Little Esson's masterpiece which, framed, and on the great easel, awaited only the never-achieved finishing touches.

"She's coming back—she has promised!" cried Little Esson, quelling one storm and at the same time raising another.

Old "Pitch-and-Toss" well deserved its name as the "boys" danced about the uneven floor—both those who remembered the former things and those who had only heard, as in a tale that is told, of the beauty and grace of Miss Mina Hilliard.

But before long a graver shade overspread the faces of the three seniors, the "Old Guard" of Mina's idolators.

"Well, Esson," said Fuzzy Wells, with the air of one who puts a poser, "that would be the best news of the year, but for one thing. What are you going to do with Jerome?"

"Shut up, you fellows there!" shouted Glencairn, "or we will fire you. This isn't a time to be rotting like so many crabs in a basket!"

As MacBrayne and the brothers were scuffling on the floor, a sofa-leg cracked and a pile of

"traps"—portfolios, tin boxes, and miscellaneous gear, tumbled to the ground.

"Hold a survey of the damage, and make them pay up on the spot!" said John Glencairn; "that's the only way with bad children! Here goes:—

	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>
ITEM.—One bottle of varnish, a little saved, say	0	8
One busted sofa-leg, damaged previously	1	2
Floor messed, unspoilable, ditto rug ..	0	0
Total	1	10

One-third part adjudged payable by MacBrayne, Dick Barnetson, and "Bulfrog" of that ilk! How often does three go in one-and-ten, Fuzzy? Your father's a banker, you ought to know. Shilling a-piece—that won't do—too much, you say? Well, do it for yourselves. Eightpence each, and tuppens to me for the actuarial work and the general fuss. Now, you fellows, pay up, or out you go!"

"Yes," said the other two seniors, as in duty bound backing up Glencairn, "pay him or go out."

It was the rule of old "Pitch-and-Toss," and the three malefactors handed over, growling under their breath, yet fearing to be fined for bad language if they spoke out their minds. Glencairn dropped the cash into a large, battered tin canister, marked prominently with the words, "POORS' BOX!"

But the problem of Jerome Hilliard was still to face.

"I know both the Chief Constable and the Sheriff," said John Glencairn, who had bold ideas and peremptory ways. "Get him to assault somebody, and I can easily get the beast thirty days—or even three months."

But Fuzzy Wells pointed out that this would never do, in so much as it could not add to Mina's happiness to have her brother haled along the Creelport streets by the minions of the law, or to know, each time she raised her eyes to the battlements of the New Jail, that a near relative was languishing there on cold water and skilly!

Then Little Esson propounded his scheme for carrying Hilliard off in a fishing smack.

"Dangerously like kidnapping—might get a few years' bread and skilly ourselves over that," said John Glencairn. "I think I've got a better plan. Lend him to me for a night, and I'll try the resources of Creelport. Always, if you can, make it a rule to patronise home industries. I will take him to Amen Hall, and see if *they* can't reform him as they did his father! Who knows? At any rate, it's a chance!"



CHAPTER X.

THE CONVERSION OF JEROME HILLIARD, LANDSCAPE PAINTER.

AMEN HALL was an ugly squat building, situated on a cross street, in what Mr. Jeelypiece, the owner, was pleased to consider the "slums" of the town. It was, in fact, the only old and historic portion of the burgh of Creelport, always excepting the tall, gaunt castle and the picturesque towers of the Old Jail, now ivy-covered from battlement to postern-door, and given over to the starlings and swallows, jackdaws and pigeons.

But then John Jeelypiece built Amen Hall, not so much to do his poorer townsfolk good as to gratify a private grudge against the churches.

"I'll learn them to refuse a licence to retail wine and spirits to the most respectable man in all Creelport," he said, loud and often, "when sic waffies as Sam'l Keelson and Grier Gregorson get it—the last little better than a cadger, him and his phaeton rinnin' about for orders, wi' its muckle side-lamps and a high-stepper between the shafts! I'll learn them all, and Do-a-k-ter

Jo-a-n Broadbent, minister o' the pairish, at the head o' them."

With those who accepted of his invitation to conduct meetings in Amen Hall, Mr. Jeelypiece had a short and simple method.

"Your meat, your bed, and a pound a week, *so loang as ye continue to give satisfaction*, me taking the collections," he would say. "Or, if so be ye prefer it, the collection every second night, and find yoursel'!"

For short engagements the former arrangement was generally preferred, but occasionally some strong, vigorous man, with confidence in his powers, would prefer to evangelise on the half-profits system. It was all one to Mr. Jeelypiece. So soon as "the meetings fell off in interest," which meant when the receipts did not balance the expenditure, the evangelist took a third-class ticket at Creelport Station, and disappeared into parts unknown. Then that night Mr. Jeelypiece, with a softened voice, would refer to "our dear brother who has left us, to carry the good tidings to other cities also!" In that case he would add, "Humble and unworthy as I am, I will make so bold as to conduct the meeting myself." Whereupon all those seated near the door immediately got out into the open air.

Strange fish came to the Amen Hall net—by no means all of the Jeelypiece type. Many were honest, narrow enthusiasts at war with the churches on points doctrinal, or with the buzz

of a bee somewhere under the eaves of their tall, weather-beaten silk hats.

Creelport will not soon forget the rhapsody of Mr. Pilgrim Potifer upon the text "Strong drink is raging," or his denunciation of all those who, under the protecting umbrella of religion, hold or are willing to hold grocers' licences.

"The publican," he said, "is a bold, bad devil, with the credit of his convictions, but the man who would hold a grocers' licence is a little, mean, sneaking, elder-at-the-plate devil. My friends, we should hoot him on the street, in the market-place, even when throned among holy things!" And he stretched out his hand towards Mr. John Jeelpiece, who, as usual, occupied the chair.

"All the people now present who agree with me in this matter, say Amen!"

And, as Amen Hall was crowded that night, a great and joyful noise came back to the gratified Mr. Pilgrim Potifer, as all the people said Amen.

But John Jeelpiece, after advising the singing of a hymn, sent his foreman to turn out the gas, and declared the meeting at an end. He declined to accept the assurance that Mr. Potifer knew nothing about his private business affairs, and absolutely refused to receive him into his house that night, offering, however, to pay his fare on to Drumfern (where he could get suitable lodgings) by the night train.

Mr. Pilgrim Potifer, however, was not a man to have his mouth stopped in this fashion, and the

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next day said his say out on the public street, at that portion of it known as Jeelypiece's Corner. The frantic proprietor of Amen Hall forthwith sent for the police, advised the Fiscal and the Sheriff, all the while breathing lightnings and thunders from behind his counter. But since at no time in Creelpport could a crowd ever be said to collect, and as all Mr. Jeelypiece's neighbours kept well within their own open doors and windows (with only their heads out so as not to lose a word), there was really no reason for the police to interfere with the preaching of the Gospel. It is even said that certain high influences prevented them from moving on Mr. Potifer till he had finished dealing most faithfully with Mr. Jeelypiece, under the name of "The Would-be Liquor Seller!" It was, take it for all in all, such a day as Creelpport is not likely to see again in a hurry. The old residents still talk of it with joy chastened by the reflection that the past is past, and can return no more.

That afternoon Mr. Potifer took the largest collection in Creelpport he had ever put into the Disciple's Bag, which he carried in his left trousers' pocket. He ever after referred to the burgh as a place where he had found a crop of grace flourishing on the most unpromising soil of any town in Scotland.

"In mine innocence I made a mock of the hypocrite," he said afterwards, in his peculiar fashion of speech, "and lo! even the hearts of

the ungodly were rejoiced thereat. I brought away much spoil—see Exodus iii., 22.”

Neither will Creelport forget that other missionary whom it ever afterwards cherished in its recollection next after Mr. Pilgrim Potifer, and referred to affectionately by the title of “The Beast with the Ten Horns.” He was a tall, thin man, with long, grey elf-locks, and looked, as Antiquary Jamie profanely said, “like the prophet Isaiah, after he had been sawn asunder and joined up again, or Jonah just after he had been let out of the whale’s belly.” The “Ten Horn” man had maps and models and almanacks, and he talked about the Battle of Armageddon, giving its date, with the assurance of a schoolboy referring to the Battle of Waterloo. He also spoke about the Judgment Day as if it had been fixed for next Tuesday week, and frightened the women almost into hysterics by the intimation that the world might come to an end either that night or that night ten years hence—he was not sure which. It depended on a small matter of interpretation as to the little horn which should arise between the eyes of a certain Fourth Beast, great and terrible, which had iron teeth !

But, for the males of his Creelport audience, the true joy did not arise till he began to manipulate his collection of models. The “rough goat” with the horn exalted between his eyes was a foretaste. But it was not till the lecturer began to exhibit the terrible Fourth Beast with the

Ten Horns, and show how three of them had already disappeared (these were, if Creelport remembers right, Poland, the Papal dominions, and the Holy Roman Empire), and especially when the one little horn arose (which was Britain), there was absolutely deafening applause. But just when, before the eyes of all, the horn was increasing and developing the eyes of a cuttlefish, Bibby's bull terrier, which had for some time scented a rival, charged suddenly down upon the Beast, and with ignoble vigour shook the very horns out of it, before either the audience or the horrified lecturer or even Bibby himself could interfere. This for a time discouraged the interpretation of prophecy by graphic means in Creelport, and Bibby refused ten pounds for his bull-terrier that very night in the bar of the "Blue Lion."

Ten pounds was indeed no price at which to part with an animal which had destroyed the Beast of the Iron Teeth, and perhaps (who knows?) put off indefinitely all the terrible things concerning which the lecturer had been prophesying.

Not all, however, were causes of mirth in Creelport who opened out their souls in Amen Hall. There were genuine cases of making an end of the old and earnestly beginning the new. Quiet, anxious men spoke there the message that was in them, and though the Creelport soil was poor, the Dee winds boisterous, and the fowls of the air many, a certain portion of seed sprang up, and some even brought forth fairly good grain.

The trouble was that these wandering preachers, here to-day and (having displeased the worshipful owner of the hall) gone to-morrow, could keep no hold upon their converts. They could give them nothing to do, which is the only safety of such, and indeed, the chief secret of Salvation Army success.

But Mr. Simon Broolie, who now held Amen Hall, under the immediate supervision of Mr. Jeelypiece, was a new type in Creelport.

Mr. Broolie was still a young man, known over a considerable portion of the United Kingdom as "The Silver Trumpeteer." At a very early age he had been learned to use his bugle and various other wind instruments in the vicinity of the barracks yard which had been his early home. When his time of military service was expired, he had transferred his services to the Salvation Army, where, however, his talents had been somewhat severely repressed. It was not therefore till he had cut the bonds and undauntedly launched himself and his cornet upon the world that his real powers appeared.

An enthusiast, genuinely convinced of his mission to regenerate the world by the simplest means, Simon Broolie was almost wholly uneducated, conserving only some waifs and strays of the instruction originally belted into him by the regimental schoolmaster. But, in his well-cut, semi-military undress, with the plain ribbons of a staff officer barring his breast, a face cut like a cameo, fair hair in tightly buckled ringlets about

his brow, and light blue, German eyes, Simon Broolie was by no means the usual denizen of Amen Hall.

On the night when John Glencairn took Jerome Hilliard to the meeting, the latter's father was not present. He had, at the urgent request of Mr. Jeelypiece (who, with all his hatred of "the sects," hated still more unlicensed amateurs, over whose utterances he had no control), carried his proselytising efforts to other cities also.

Mr. Simon Broolie had announced, more modestly than was his wont, in the red and white of double pica, that the title of his address would be "The Jolly Sinner Jolly-well Saved." The "jolly sinner" was, of course, Mr. Broolie himself, who, apparently, had at one time belied his present aspect, which was distinctly ascetic. Jerome, who only proposed to look in for half-an-hour before going to the "Three Sea Dogs," prepared himself to be amused. But he did not know Simon Broolie.

At first there was nothing more exciting than a few hymns, sung by the unattached choir of female voices, which Simon's silver trumpet and Adonis head drew around him within forty-eight hours of his appearance in any town in the three kingdoms. To do Simon justice, he wasted no time on these, save to tell them to sing more softly, except at the choruses in which the audience were supposed to join. Then he waved his arms, as if calling thousands to battle, and, setting the

silver trumpet to his lips, he blew upon it such blasts as might well have caused the battlements of Jericho to fall down flat.

John Glencairn, born of a military family, and firmed by the training of a public school, knew how easily a strong, confident nature, even when uneducated, can dominate one weakened by excess and seeking a refuge from itself. He therefore watched Jerome Hilliard carefully, remaining, as he told himself, personally unmoved, like that Gallio who cared for none of these things. Neither did *he* know Simon Broolie.

It was this young man's way, at the beginning, to pass from hymn to prayer, and from prayer to the recitation of a few verses of Scripture rapidly and without a pause. Then he stood up with his trumpet in his hand, and he spoke in a low, clear tone, which yet reached the furthest corner of the hall.

Simon Broolie began with the barrack yard, the *reveille* ringing forth in the grey mornings, the men tumbling out, the short, sharp words of command, barked rather than spoken, the jovial sing-song after supper in the canteen, the life on the troopship, a tempest, the groaning and crying in the belly of the ship, the grey plains and the hidden enemy, the sudden outburst of the deadly shot, the tearing wound, the cursing and profanation as the men swung forward into battle—the tents pitched at night under the stars, which, somehow, have grown strangely

nearer, winking many-coloured through the dew, hardly higher than the tent-poles.

All this he told swiftly, briefly, with rough, soldierly words, little choice of language, but all to the point—a great narrator with the living voice was Simon Broolie. Even John Glencairn, who had been born in India, and as a child had known the barrack yard, felt his heart swell strangely within him as he listened to the familiar routine of the day, faithfully given, and at every pause of description the bugle blew the appropriate call.

Looking about him, he could see faces pale and quiver under the spoken word. Jerome had smiled at first, even laughed aloud. A fine jest he would make of it to-morrow with the "boys." But wait, the smile had already been wiped from his face. He did not turn and laugh scornfully any more. There had come a look on the speaker's face, a kind of flicker like summer lightning, as John Glencairn described it afterwards—"something that he seemed to be throwing out of him," wherewith held his audience spellbound.

It was the battle now—headlong, confused—the night attack, desperate against a stronger, a hidden foe whom the men could not reach. Forward they go! It is the charge—no, back again. "Hold your ground, men!" The musketry rattles dryly; the machine guns whirr; the little one-pound shells squatter like wild-fowl on a pond. Men are falling on all sides; they break—they run! No, no—stop them! "The

rally—sound the rally ! ” All is lost unless help comes ! Hurrah, all is not lost. Help is here !

In the bitter hour of distress arrives the Great General, bringing succour with him—safety, glory, victory, honour ! And now the troops are passing the gates of the conquered city, the massed bands play and the newly unfurled banner of the Motherland flaps out on the moderate wind. Glory to the God of Battles—glory—glory—glory !

Then, without a pause, suddenly the speaker's voice took on a deeper strain of pleading. It is another warfare of which he is telling now, another battlefield of which they are hearing. Each man is fighting the one combat of his life—that night, that hour, even, it must be settled. The issue must be decided right away. Lo, Death on his White Horse and Hell following after ! The enemy is ready to seize and carry down to the pit ! How is it to end ? What is to be the answer he is to carry back to his Captain when he asks Simon Broolie how goes the warfare in Creelport ? There is an empty bench there—(he pointed with his hand)—there in front of all the people. And if, in that audience, there was one soul with a fear that the Devil would win the victory, let him come and kneel there. Ay, before his comrades—ay, before those who laughed ! For the General-in-Chief was at hand—succour was at hand—victory, happiness, the new life eternal could be had for the asking ! And again the silver trumpet blew the gathering call.

Then, sure as an echo, from the crowded benches here and there sobs suddenly rose. A raw young country lad, with his head on his breast; two or three mill-girls, linked together by their sobs—a young shopman, angrily shaking off his companions' restraining grip on his coat-tails. These stumbled forward and knelt down stiffly, as if they had never knelt before in their lives.

"HE is here—HE is among us—first fruits! Glory!" cried the evangelist, "sin is afraid. The Devil trembles. In many bosoms his empire is shaking. You feel the anguish; it is the old Enemy digging his claws deeper into your hearts. Out with him! Come and get help where these struggling souls are getting it. Pray, brethren, pray!"

And as it were lifting them up with a wave of his hand, all prayed silently. It was during the indescribable agitation which followed that John Glencairn felt a quiver at his side, then the nervous shudder of an uncontrollable sob. Surely not Jerome! And then a strange thing came over John Glencairn. He had brought Hilliard to Amen Hall with some vague expectation of this, yet the reality startled him. It was as if he had been looking at witchcraft. He feared for himself. Who might go next? So now he turned to catch Jerome Hilliard by the sleeve. He was ashamed and yet excited.

"Come," he whispered, "this is nothing to laugh at. Let us get outside."

But Jerome, who had never taken his eye off the face of the speaker, on which the summer lightning flickered and shone like wildfire, shook him off roughly. Simon Broolie had noted the young man with the hollow cheeks and the pale face from the first, and marked him as a captive. He had seen the smiles fade out from his face ; he had watched the lips set, the light kindle in the eyes. And now, with the instinct of the true evangelist (genuine beneath, all merely outward vulgarity of method), he called upon him. He beckoned with his finger, and Jerome Hilliard followed, fascinated, till, scarce knowing how, he found himself on his knees at the " penitent form."

"Gad," muttered John Glencairn, who felt the tense electricity of the place, the magnetic appeal in the evangelist's eyes, "I had better get outside, or I may find myself there, too!"

And snatching up his hat, he fled. Simon Broolie walked the floor of Amen Hall that night for hours with his new convert—aye, almost till the morning light. Then he took Jerome Hilliard home with him to his lodgings. For Simon Broolie, though he liked a good collection and asked for it, was at heart no hireling.

Thus was a second Hilliard converted within the precincts of Amen Hall. But, as of old, there are conversions and conversions, and only the few shall declare concerning any man, whether he build his tabernacle of wood, hay, stubble, or of gold unalterable in any furnace.



"He beckoned with his finger, and Jerome Hilliard followed."
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CHAPTER XI.

“ LAZARUS, AWAKE ! ”

SIMON BROOLIE took young Jerome Hilliard with him, both to keep him straight and because that wide awake evangelist discovered that the young man could instantaneously design the most varied scenes in coloured chalks, developing them under the very eyes of the audience while he of the silver trumpet was speaking. The two of them would, he saw clearly, form an irresistible combination during the American camp-meeting season. So, drawing a little money out of the savings bank (for Simon Broolie was a prudent man), they packed their bags and departed for the park-like pleasaunces of Ocean Grove.

Armed with his quarterly allowance, Claude Hilliard also had vanished to cities greater than Creelpport. It was reported that he was evangelising among the masses in London.

A certain shamefaced silence kept the “ boys ’ ’ from divulging the means by which they had rid themselves of Jerome Hilliard. Indeed, John Glencairn, who was not to be trifled with, would allow no scoffing, either at Simon Broolie or in connection with his methods of conversion.

“ You were not there, you fellows,” he would say, thumping his great fist on the table. “ By consequence, you know nothing about it. Shut up, then, or you may chance to be sorry ! If the man was a humbug—well, so am I a humbug, that’s all. He has a work to do, and he can do it. I wish I could say as much for myself or for any one of you blessed daubers ! ”

It was about a week after the coasts of Old Pitch-and-Toss had thus been cleared that Mina fulfilled her promise and came to criticise the pictures, to see the burned hole in the carpet, and to smell the soap under the daïs—indeed, generally to open the closed book of the past. This is always difficult, generally disillusioning.

As they went Miss Bee buzzed comfortably alongside of Mina’s rounded yet slender figure. She had never before visited Pitch-and-Toss, the name of which she always forgot and generally referred to, not without some reason, as “ Rough-and-Tumble.” The period of her nursing Little Esson dated further back than the building of Pitch-and-Toss, or rather the re-assembling of its heterogeneous elements into a composite but fairly well-lighted and watertight series of sheds.

Never had Miss Bee appeared more deserving of her name. Attired in brown silk, and to the eye wadded all over like a tea-cosy, she wore a bonnet of black picked-out with orange, having little puffy orange feathers disposed symmetrically in a bird’s-nest shape on top. Pitch-and-Toss lay,

as the song says, "down a shady lane," but like other shady lanes this one was also muddy, and Miss Bee, trussing up her brown silk skirt (and exhibiting in so doing a petticoat of orange to match her bonnet), looked altogether like a comfortable mother bumble, going out a-visiting on a sunny afternoon and burbling as she went.

Mina was delighted to hear the greetings of the good wives at their doors as Miss Bee went by, the mumbled salutations of the ancient gaffers sitting on the low railing-walls with both hands on their sticks, and their chins poised upon the knuckles of the uppermost.

It was, "Ah, Miss Bee," and "Eh, Miss Bee," and "Save us, Miss Bee; wha wad hae thocht to see ye dressed sae braw at this hour o' the day?" Also Mina was amused by Miss Bee's extremely outspoken advice, and really too intimate questionings of the young married women as to their state of health, and hopes of future posterity.

"I always like to hear of that," said Miss Bee, when a proud grandmother exposed with infinite detail the recent arrival of twins to her daughter's address. "I am always pleased to hear such good news, especially when the parents belong to the parish kirk. Tell your daughter Bell," she added, "with Miss Bee Broadbent's compliments, that she's a credit to the 'auld kirk,' and mony mae o' them!"

"Are ye no thinkin'," said the sly old wife, with the pawky turn which, in Creelport, is allowed only to the

aged in speaking to their social superiors, "o' doin' something for the Auld Kirk on your ain account?"

"Ower late, Betsy Grier," answered Miss Bee, promptly, "it's lang chappit the eleventh hour wi' me, and what, think you, would Dr. John do without me?"

"Toots, Miss Bee," cried Betsy Grier, now at the pitch of good humour, "think o' Sara in the Scriptures."

"I dare say," retorted the ready Miss Bee, nowise abashed, "but, ye see, Betsy, I hae been overly long in thinking about Abraham. And, more than that, if it is not given to me to be a mother in Israel, I am at least nursing-mother to half the parish!"

"Deed, ye are that," cried Betsy Grier, "as mony a puir lass has had guid reason to ken, and mony a mitherless bairn has lifted up its voice to call ye blessed!"

"I dinna ken about calling me blessed," said Miss Bee, "but for a fact they do lift up their voices, one and all."

"Aweel, but ye maun alloo it's a heartsome thing after a'," protested Betsy, "ye ha'e nae notion how blithesome it is—no' to be able to bear your ain tongue in my dochter Bell's kitchen, when the twins are skirlin' like fire yin again the ither, like twa precenters raisin' different tunes in ae kirk!"

* * * *

It was full June of a perfect summer, and the "boys" had made the paint-spattered walls of Pitch-and-Toss gay in honour of Mina and Miss

Bee. John Glencairn had proposed sending to Glasgow for a new carpet, but Esson, with a sympathy which was at once acknowledged to be truer, said that if he knew their 'Pride aright,' she would like better to look at the old hole as it had always been. So the Barnetson brothers were set to contracting the limits of those tears and burns, which seemed to have become larger through lapse of time, while the rest scoured the braes for wild flowers. For a reason best known to himself, Little Esson tabooed hawthorn blossom, and the yellow broom upon a background of dark green was the scheme of colour finally decided upon. So many a whinny knowe, many a broomy dingle was despoiled (paintable bits being carefully preserved), and farmer and gamekeeper saw and smiled to each other as "thae daft artist boys" carried off armfuls of broom to their dens.

In general a considerable protection was afforded to them, and it was understood that so long as they kept out of covers, they might pretty well go where they liked and do much as they would. The liberty of those 'touched in the upper storey' was theirs for five miles all around Creelport.

Thus was the studio decorated, but as "Fuzzy" Wells said, the best decoration was when they "chucked" Jerome Hilliard's mattress and "traps" into the loft of a neighbouring outhouse.

"Oof, boys," he said, when he had finished, "it does one good to think that he won't come tumbling in right in the middle of it all."

Then MacBrayne was told off to open the door and show the visitors in. They decided that his dark coat, square beard, and respectable appearance give quite a family air to Old Pitch-and-Toss, which would reassure Mina as to the safety of coming back. The serving of the tea was in Allan Barnetson's hands. He was a handsome boy, and in an apron borrowed from the waiting-maid at the "Royal" (where they sometimes dined) and a broad collar cut out of linen, and turned-back cuffs of the same, he looked "pretty enough to put on the mantelpiece," as Little Esson said, to the youth's infinite disgust, for he prided himself on the manliness of his appearance.

Neil Barnetson, the elder brother, was sent up on the roof to shove back the skylights and rig up a kind of sparred tent of sail-cloth above; because, though sheltered by trees, Old Pitch-and-Toss sometimes became close of a sunny afternoon, unless precautions were taken to the contrary. Neil Barnetson was always given the difficult and dangerous jobs to do, for the very excellent reason that when he was young his father had been forehanded enough to insure his life. The premium was now fully paid up, and as the "boys" frequently pointed out to Neil, he was losing money all the time merely by living. So, by sending him up there, they were generously giving him chances of recovering it—if not for himself, at least for his family.

The wish which Neil Barnetson expressed as to

his family was exceedingly improper, and shall not be recorded here.

Nevertheless, he went—for the sake of Mina Fairweather.

She came. Little Esson signalled her from their watch-tower, through the damaged field-glasses, approved of for this occasion only.

On hearing his shout, John Glencairn first pulled down his waistcoat carefully, looked at the toes of his boots, and then said, "What dress has she got on?"

For, as they all thought of the sketches they were to make after she was gone, this was a question of some moment.

"One I never saw before," reported Esson, "not black—a kind of a shell grey, I think."

"Ah," cried the "boys" with one voice, "glad it's not black!"

"You should see her in pale sea-green, with a tall, gold lily in her hand," began Fuzzy Wells, with the unction of reminiscence.

"Your grandmother!" snapped John Glencairn, "d'ye suppose, Fuzzy, that she would come through the streets of Creelport monkeyed up like one of old Hodder's draped models at the Life Class?"

Little Esson put away his telescope, and moved uncomfortably about putting away bottles and scraping at "gobs" of paint which had remained quietly on the wall for years.

"Don't fidget about like that, Esson," said John Glencairn. "Why, one would think to look at you that she was expecting to sweep

through marble halls. You should have thought of that when your architect designed the plans. It's too late to alter things now."

From without came a hum of voices. Miss Bee's steady drone, with a *ring-ring* of something young and silvery running through it.

Six hearts within Old Pitch-and-Toss suddenly, and in varying degrees, changed the average rate of their beat. Something tingled in Little Esson's palms; something thickened in John Glencairn's throat; something made Fuzzy Wells wish that his feet were not so big and clumsy—and Mina entered.

"Boys!" was all she said.

But they felt that she could not have bettered it. The Old Guard shook hands with pride, the youngsters with due humility. No introductions were made. It was not the custom of Pitch-and-Toss, and Mina knew it.

Instead, all the men mumbled something indistinctly, and Miss Bee launched out about the decorations, which, a moment later, Mina took in and nodded at Esson.

"No," he said honourably, "I would like to slump the credit, but they are all in it."

"In my honour?" she asked softly.

"In your honour."

"And Miss Bee's?" she continued.

"Well, if you like, in Miss Bee's also," said Little Esson, under his breath. But there was a something lacking in the feast she had so long looked forward to, In the moment during which

she was speaking, he had seen her eyes pass about the little circle, seek a face, fail to find it, and then droop. Perhaps it was that of Terry Fairweather which she sought. If so, all was right. If not—not.

But in a moment Mina was herself again. She did the honours of Pitch-and-Toss to Miss Bee, stood entranced before "April Showers," Esson's masterpiece, which when exhibited was to add certain letters to his name—letters which run more easily than any others off a young artist's tongue. When she came to MacBrayne, who stood solemnly regarding her, an arrangement in black beard and carefully combed locks, she paused.

"Where do you get this?" she said, laying a hand on his arm (the yellow on the dark green walls was a gay note and cheered Mina in spite of herself); "do you keep it packed in ice, and have it out to cool the room on hot afternoons?"

"No," said Esson, "this is the fellow that does the cooling. Here, you, Neil," And the tale of Neil Barnetson's life assurance was told, to Miss Bee's great delight.

"I wish," she said, "you would lend him to us to shake down our damsons in the autumn. Lummy is too old, and I wouldn't let Dr. John risk his limbs for all the damsons in Christendom. They hang over into Mina's garden, and she will get them if I don't mind."

"We will *all* come," cried the "boys" in chorus. "To-morrow, if you like," added John Glencairn impetuously.



CHAPTER XII:

THE GREAT GULF FIXED.

THE inequality of the sexes is inherent, indisputable, not to be argued, still less legislated away. A man who has loved a woman may cut himself clear, once and for ever. He may meet the lady face to face in the street, take off his hat (if so permitted), pass tranquilly on his way, and forget all about her by the time he has turned the first corner.

But with a woman it is not so. A man to whom a woman has once truly committed her love always keeps an influence over her—stronger, of course, in some natures than in others, and capable of modification by new affections. All the same, an influence which does not utterly die, and subject to times of revival which are dangerous.

Now, a strong, insensitive nature, accustomed to brush aside obstacles, generally ends by getting its own way. In proof of which Hunter Mayne walked home that night with Mina Fairweather, while Miss Bee trotted docilely on in front, murmuring commonplaces to the adder-deaf ears

of Little Esson. Behind them all Pitch-and-Toss raged vehemently, refusing to be comforted.

"He has not put his confounded hoofs inside our place for six months till to-day," thus went up, tormented, the voice of their crying. "The sweep, the swine—the ox of the stall ; may his—and his—— ! "

And so on and so forth. The words of the litany of anathema change with the ages, but the spirit never. Finally, the raving of these young men was summed up thus—

"Oh, hang Hunter Mayne—he has spoilt our day ! "

But the "boys" were perhaps over-hasty in thinking Hunter Mayne fortunate in thus carrying off the Pride of Pitch-and-Toss from the midst of their *fête*.

"No," Mina was saying to him, as they followed the shaded lanes which led meadowwards, the road along which the white-thorns were again blossoming—"no, I do not desire that you should come and call upon me. I have not forgot that which is so long past. It is dead, indeed. But I have dearer dead to think about, dearer and truer dead than that Thing which failed me in the day of my need. I have known Terry Fairweather, at whom you used to laugh. And now, Mr. Hunter Mayne, I am instructed as to the difference between brass and gold."

"But I never thought you meant it, Mina," pleaded the young man, bending his head a little

lower towards her ear ; for it seemed as if Esson and Miss Bee had come a trifle nearer. " You do me wrong. Indeed, it is true. I never thought—I never dreamed. If you would only give me a chance of explaining ! "

" Ah, Mr. Mayne "—the voice of Mina Fairweather softened a little—" it is too late—a full year too late. You had your chance, and you would not. What more is there to be said between you and me ? "

" But if I can show you, not on my own word, but by proof absolute, that at the moment I had not the right or even the power to speak ? "

" It would still be useless," said the girl. " Terry's grave is between us."

" But you never loved him," cried Hunter Mayne, so sharply that Mina involuntarily held up her hand with an old-time gesture which went to his heart more than all words—he remembered it so well. " You did not love him. Why, that very morning, in these very meadows, when I was painting——"

" You do not need to remind me," said the girl ; " I do not forget. But I wonder, Hunter, that you like to recall your own shame. You were painting the hawthorn blossom yonder. It was a little brown and seared, where the sun had caught it on a morning of frost, and I said to try you, that the love that had once been between us was also in the sere and yellow leaf, and that the winter of our discontent would soon be upon us—ah,

I little knew how soon ! And so you lifted up your hand and swore—you never could only say a thing, you must affirm it by an oath—‘Mina,’ you said—oh, no, I have not forgotten—‘I will love you when all the leaves of all the years are brown and sere !’ A pretty speech ; have you many more left like that ? To whom do you now lift up your hand and swear ? Thank God, oh, thank God, I found an honest man—a man whose word was his bond, and who left me at least an unstained name ! ”

Then it was that Hunter Mayne’s native brutality of temper blazed suddenly.

“And they say it was about all he *did* leave you ! ” he uttered, the words, clean and *net*, each one viciously clipping the next.

Mina looked steadily at him, and there was such a calm peace of contempt in her eyes, so that almost for the first time Hunter Mayne felt the girl stronger than himself. And Mina knew it, too.

“I am not angry,” she said ; “no, Hunter—I am grateful to Terry for putting it in my power to know Mr. Hunter Mayne, if for nothing else. All my life I had looked up to you. You were the boy who fought for me, the lad who chose me at the games, who walked with me in the gloaming to see the steamer come in—you remember the old *Countess of Creelport* ? I never thought of anyone but you. You were as the sun—the air about me. I trusted you like the

ground I walked upon. And then in the day of my need—bah! I will not call you coward, Hunter Mayne, because the name is too good for a man who, in the moment of her terrible agony, would forsake the girl to whom he has been bound by oaths, by prayers, by vows, who only that very morning had discussed plans for their future. No, Hunter, I see you now across the great gulf which you yourself have made between us, and it is as if I looked at you through the wrong end of a telescope—so small you are!”

“You are wrong, Mina, you are cruel,” cried Hunter Mayne; “you will not listen to me!”

Mina smiled again—that smile which irritated and piqued the young man so much, so full it was of knowledge and experience and a certain fine-drawn contempt.

“As I said at the first,” she went on calmly, “so I tell you now—it is too late. You have *had* your chance. You know what you did with it. Across the gulf you have made between us neither you nor I can pass over, even if we would.”

“Mina, will you turn me from your door?”

“Hunter,” said Mina, with grave directness, “I have learned many things during these months. I was a foolish girl, but I am far from being a foolish woman. Creelport is pleased to be interested in me—I do not know very well why, and—I am Terence Fairweather’s widow. They

shall not have a stone to throw at *him*, if I can help it. If you have anything to say to me, come to the Manse on Monday afternoon—any Monday—it is Doctor John's holiday—and Miss Bee will see to it that you have a chance to say it. But I advise you not to. Good-night, Hunter; you need not come up. Miss Bee will excuse you!"

And though Hunter Mayne went away at once, fiercely angry and bitterly humiliated to feel that he could no longer sway Mina by his nod, there were some things which recurred to his memory to give him hope.

"That's very well about not going to her house, and being Terry Fairweather's widow, and so forth," he murmured; "but the short and the long of it is, she's afraid of me! We shall see!"

And he rattled the keys of the new studio and went up the steps of his staircase three at a time.

* * * * *

On the Monday afternoon following, Hunter Mayne lay stretched out in his great lounge chair, going over in his mind the heads of the belated explanation he was that day to make to Mina Fairweather. He knew Mina's weakness, and now, all unexpectedly, he was learning Mina's strength. He had resolved to strike at both.

It was in the warm honeysuckle-smelling glow of a June afternoon that Hunter Mayne made

his way within the Manse precincts. Miss Bee, trowel in hand, grubbed among the water-worn stones of her rock-garden, trying hard to make-believe that stone-crop and house-leek were flowers of price, because they took such a lot of trouble to make grow where she wanted them to.

"A good afternoon to you, Mr. Mayne," said Miss Bee, with something less than her usual heartiness. "I suppose you have come to see my brother. You will most likely find him over there by the wallflower seat. Excuse me, my hands are, as you see, not fit to shake!"

For if anybody ever had little prejudices of their own in a high state of effectiveness, it was Miss Bee—little as one would have expected it from her comfortable exterior. But Hunter Mayne had that before him, which, however unjust his quarrel, thrice-armed him against Miss Bee's rather blunt arrows. He found, not Doctor John, but what he had come to seek, sitting on an arbour seat, roses over her head clambering upon a trellis-work of iron wire, surrounded on three sides by the great nine-foot quickset hedge, and banked in on the other by velvety brown wallflower and the light satiny sheen of the old-fashioned gillyflower. It was a place of a sweet smell, and Dr. John often sat here, when, as he loved to say, "the winter was past and the rain over and gone, when the flowers appeared on the earth and time of the singing of birds was come."

But it was another who now sat there, even Mina Fairweather. She wore her black mourning dress—the dress in which she balanced delicately between Terry's prohibition of any mourning and that respect for Creelpoint opinion which she judged due to his memory. It may be that she wore black for another purpose also. Perhaps in her secretest soul she feared Hunter Mayne, and was not sorry to put a remembrance of Terry's grave between them.

Hunter, though but seldom at a loss, stood a moment uncertain where to begin. She put out her hand, and he held it a moment. She did not offer him a place beside her. But Mayne was a bold young man, and one seat was as good to him as another. He looked about him, and seeing at the corner of the harbour the stump of an oak about three feet high, up which Miss Bee proposed to train ivy for her rock garden when it should be rotten enough, he pulled it close up in front of Mina and sat down.

Some scrap of work lay on Mina's lap to disguise her thoughts, the froth of useless white-broidering thread and fine linen—which the fingers of women love to play with in moments of embarrassment.

"Mina," he began firmly, as the girl did not speak or offer him the least encouragement, "you do not help me when I have come."

"I did not wish you to come," she said coldly enough, her eyes firm on the twisting thread.

"For all that, I have something to say which will make you sorry for having misjudged me!"

He spoke confidently, but Mina's eyes clave ever the more closely to the white mist of thread she was tangling so hopelessly.

"It is a strange story," he began; "strange, that is, to tell you here, in a Scottish manse garden. Indeed, that it is true—and that it has made both our lives what they are—is my only excuse for bringing things violent and terrible into the midst of this paradise of peace."

And he filled his chest with the odour of the shaded wallflowers from which the dew was still only drying. His eye took in the carefully ordered paths, which Dr. John himself had raked that morning, the deep blue of the shadow under the arch of the quickset, the roses clambering on the whitewashed wall, the massed blooms of the famous "Rambler" bobbing in at Mina's cottage window, and between them and the far-drawn blue line of sea, the glitter of the mowers' scythes in the water-meadows.

Hunter Mayne, painter-like, took all this in; and then, with a sigh that he could not at once set his fingers to work upon it, began to tell his story. It was difficult at the outset, but the interest came in the telling. As for Mina, he held her attention from the first.

"Did you ever wonder," he asked, "how it was that Terry, your husband, was so excellent a linguist?"

"I knew he had travelled," said Mina carelessly ; " he went abroad with his mother every year during her last illness."

"Yes, to Nice," said Hunter Mayne, "and twice with me yet further afield."

"I have heard him say that the winter before—before—we were married, you and he spent several months in Egypt. Indeed, you wrote me from there !"

"By every mail," Mayne bent a little nearer to Mina, till his moustache almost brushed the girl's white hat brim. "But what I have to tell you began in Nice. It had been going on for some time when I got there."

Mina stopped working, her fingers refusing longer to pretend. Was it possible that Hunter Mayne was going to slander the dead ? Yet something kept her tongue still. She had promised to listen. Well, she would hear it all.

"Her name was Jeanne Danicheff, and Terry had met her in the pension at which he used to live at Nice. The girl was alone ; or, at least, as good as alone. She was with a grandmother, who permitted her to come down to meals unaccompanied. Most of the time Terry's mother also remained in her room."

"And you dare tell me—ME, Mina Fairweather,—that my husband—that Terry——?"

Words were swamped in indignation.

"No," said Hunter Mayne, bending his eyes to a leaf he was twirling between his long, lithe

fingers, "no, I do not say that Terry loved her. To you I would not say so. But what is perfectly true is that the girl had obtained a certain hold over him, and even made him believe in the existence of a marriage between them."

Mina started to her feet.

"You had better tell this to Dr. John—to Miss Bee," she said; "it concerns my honour, that which you allege—I must hear it before witnesses."

He motioned her to sit down again with his hand.

"Afterwards, if you will," he said simply enough, "but you are a woman—I am a man! Judge first, and hear what I did—what it was laid upon me to do for Terry's sake!"

Mina Fairweather sat slowly down, the angry scorn of her eyes a little mixed with fear.

"You did not speak of this in his lifetime—you dared not!" she said.

"You are right," said Hunter Mayne, "I dared not. My mouth was closed."

"Go on—oh, go on!" cried the girl, weariedly, "say what you will."

"Well," said Hunter Mayne, "you remember that on the journey back we came by sea all the way—on account of Terry's health. *Jeanne Danicheff* was on board. She came on at Genoa. I saw her come among the second-class passengers, and I got Terry below before he could pick her out. I squared the ship's doctor, and between



“ ‘ You did not speak of this in his lifetime—you dared not ! ’
she said.”

Little Esau.]

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us we kept him in his state-room all the way to Southampton."

Mina's eyes looked a question, an imperious, fierce question.

"No," said Mayne gently, with a plaintive fall in his voice which was very persuasive, "no, he never knew. We got him ashore without seeing her, and the doctor saw the purser and prevented her putting down her name on the ship's books as Mrs. Terence Fairweather, which she had intended to do."

"What?" cried Mina. "The woman dared not! By what right?"

"As you say, by what right?" continued Hunter Mayne. "Doubtless none. But these foreigners have strange ideas, and women do not always act according to reason or right. She had friends, too, and papers of a kind. But, anyway, we kept her off, and smuggled Terry safely ashore. Or at least the doctor did, while I stood by the ship and kept track of the girl."

"You spoke of papers," said Mina hoarsely, "what were they?"

Mayne shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Ah," he said, "that I cannot tell you—if I could have laid hands on them, they would not have been long in existence. Letters, and so forth, I suppose. But I understood from what she said when I was trying my best to keep her from following Terry, that there was also a deed of betrothal, which in some countries—

in Germany and Russia, I believe—has the binding force of a marriage.”

“Then she did not assert that she was married to him?” questioned Mina faintly.

“Oh,” said Mayne sadly, “she asserted all sorts of things, as such women do. She talked very wildly. There was no need to believe more of it than one wished. The great thing was to keep her out of Terry’s way. I sacrificed myself for that!”

“Have you any proof of all this?” cried Mina, a sudden hope striking her brain.

Hunter Mayne put out his hand and laid it gently on the back of the girl’s.

“Wait—only a little,” he said; “I am coming to that soon enough. You forget—this is *my* tale I am telling. I am only sorry that I have to bring Terry—your husband—into it.”

He continued in a lower tone, leaning a little nearer to her cheek, so that he could almost whisper into her ear.

“You remember that morning, of which you spoke, when I was painting the hawthorn in the Town Meadow and you came by—yes, the very morning when——”

“Well?” said Mina, in a firmer voice. For any reference to the day of the scene in the studio seemed somehow to strengthen her to resist Hunter Mayne.

“Well,” continued the narrator, “when I went home that afternoon—you know Terry

was staying with me at my new studio—there, on a chair in the hall, sat . . . Jeanne Danicheff!

“‘Where is my husband?’ she demanded of me, as I stood like a fool with my fingers twisting the door-handle. ‘I want him! I know he is here with you.’

“I denied it. But, do what I would, I could not keep her out. She found her way upstairs, and seating herself on a sofa declared that she would wait there till her betrothed husband came back. I left her with old Archie—you know, who takes care of my place. He was to do the best he could, but on no account to let her go out. I came on here to get Terry away. Then at that very moment you came in, and in the turmoil of my mind, in the shock of seeing you and hearing your words, I could not speak. Is it any wonder? To do so must have been to destroy Terry—and perhaps you. Then afterwards, as you know, you would not listen to a word.”

Mina, her heart in a whirl, tried to think back to what had been.

“And what became of this—of the woman—quick?” she cried, lifting her needle like a weapon for stabbing.

“The next day Miss Grainger—Hilda Grainger, Terry’s cousin—came to my studio very angry and seeking Terry. I was out, but she found Jeanne Danicheff. At once the two girls began

speaking German, and before old Archie could stop them, they had gone off together."

"But why," moaned Mina, "if she was so angry with me—if both of them were—why did they not try to stop our marriage? It was a full week before Dr. John married us."

"Ah, that I do not know," said Mayne; "some woman's plotting, too deep for me. But you asked me for proof a minute ago. Here are her letters to Terry—I think I have them all. No one has seen them but myself. She used to write every day to him. Many of them I never even let him see. They are yours now to do what you will with."

"And the—the woman?"

"She is, I believe, at this very moment, at Broom Lodge, staying with Hilda Grainger! They are great friends," said Hunter Mayne, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Mina hastily thrust the packet of letters into her pocket, and without another word motioned Hunter Mayne away.

"When I have thought over this I will send for you," she said.



CHAPTER XIII.

MINA CALLS AT BROOM LODGE.

"NEVER have I loved any man before, but you have turned me outside in like a glove!"

Such was the sentence which caught Mina's eyes, as untying the string she scattered the packet of letters over her dressing-table. They were written in the small print-clear hand of the educated Russian, and, though in English, the structure of sentence and the mode of expression suggested a translation from the French.

"Terry" (Mina started violently to see the name of her husband written by another hand), 'you are master of my life. I make myself as nothing that I may serve you. I have annihilated myself for you! You remember, Terry, how things came to be as they are. You have not forgotten the white road up to Eza and what you said to me there. There were others in the company. We could not speak freely. So instead of answering yes or no, I took a piece of money, and said to you, 'I will not take it on me to decide. But you had better

know that, if this is to go on between us, it will not be a pleasantry for me : I may lead you far, further perhaps than you think. If the coin falls "pile" it shall be "no," if it falls "face" it shall be "yes." ' You were much astonished. Even now I can see you flush to your brow, but you only said, 'I accept.' I threw the franc in the air. It came down 'face'—and I was yours! Very well then—now I hold you to it. You are far from me, gone across the sea, but I, too, have voyaged on many seas, and I will follow you. I am not angry, Terry, but I will never leave your side."

The girl read no further. A certain accent of sincerity in the letter convinced her even more than the plain directness of Hunter Mayne's story. Mina was perhaps too good to be very clever, for the woman who overfeeds her brain is a little apt to starve her heart. She has not so much "carry-over" as a man.

She gathered up the letters, tied them in a bundle, and opening the white gate in the quick-set hedge, she hastened to the edge of the little wood of pines on the far side of the Manse glebe. Dr. John's mole-catching spade was sticking in the cleft of a tree by the side of the path. Mina snatched it, and, delving with feverish energy, had the hateful letters soon covered from sight at the roots of an elm.

Miss Bee met her coming back, her lip trembling and a bleached look on her face.



“Mina . . . had the hateful letters soon covered from sight at the roots of an elm.”

Little Esson.

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"What has happened?" she said, noticing the "spud" in her hand, "Is Saul among the prophets? Have you taken to gardening?"

"I have been burying a hateful thing out of sight!" said Mina, in a voice entirely unlike her own.

"Was that thing by any chance called Hunter Mayne?" said Miss Bee. "He was here an hour ago looking for Dr. John. I hope you have not made away with him. Such a thing might give rise to remark, even in a manse garden!"

But Mina was in no mood for jesting, even of Miss Bee's simple village sort.

"I think I will go in and lie down," she said, using the formula understood of all women: "I have got a headache."

And so well did Miss Bee understand that she did not even offer to bring her a cup of camomile tea. Mina lay all that afternoon till the late gloaming came, her head turned to the wall, her eyes open, examining the pattern on the wall paper. She refused the ministrations of Fleckie Itherword. She refused food. She refused drink—"I'll get ye a drap o' guid whiskey, missie, at the Manse; Lummy says it's grand for the *dwaums*," such had been Fleckie's proposal).

But Mina only said piteously: "Go awayr Fleckie, like a good girl. Get your own supper I shall be better to-morrow."

"The morn," said Fleckie, "that's a lang

time to thole. I mind when I had a tooth that bothered me I tied a string round it and jumpit frae the byre rafters. But though that was what Andro Banchory had telled me to do, it juist did me no good whatever. Andro said that I should ha'e tied the string to the joists as weel as roond my tooth. But na, na—Fleckie kenned better than that. She didna' want to pu' doon the guid cow-byre, and maybe be held responsible for the damage!"

The exact hearing of this, considered as consolation in her mistress's case, was apparent only to Fleckie, who, however, persisted in standing and wringing her great hands by the bedside, looking so distressful the while, that finally Mina, rising, with gentle violence pushed her outside and locked the door upon her.

Slowly the short, interminable night soughed itself away in cool breathings of wallflower up from the Manse garden, the scent of dew-wet trees that came and went through the window, which Mina had forgotten to close. A bird sang in short, drowsy breaks of song, falling asleep as it were in the middle of every second bar. Rooks began to caw with the first advent of dawn, which flushed pink and then gamboge colour on the bedroom paper and the white-wash of the sill without.

In spite of trying her hardest, Mina could not think much. Hunter Mayne's story kept beating in on her brain, without any conviction

accompanying it. Only there was a sore tightness about her heart which threatened pain as soon as she should really understand.

Early in the morning, across the Jacob's Ladder of motes that floated in on a chance sun-shaft, she heard the muffled tread of one who went softly to and fro outside her door. Fleckie walked like a policeman. Then something blew like a porpoise in the keyhole of her door. Mina laughed a little and bade Fleckie fill the big bath. If anything, that would freshen her.

"Ah, mem," cried Fleckie, startled on her knees, "and ha'e ye never sae muckle as ta'en aff your claes a' nicht? Faith, what's wrang? I never did the like, bena in the calvin' time, or maybe when Andro Banchory's auld sow was expectin'. Ye see, she was an awesome besom for——"

"Go and do as you are bid, Fleckie," commanded her mistress, cutting short any further revelations as to the maternal vagaries of Andro Banchory's "auld sow"—which perhaps was as well.

Then, in the half-light, like slenderest Dian, Mina splashed and rubbed, as Fleckie averred, "Wasting the clean towels by dizzens, to say naething o' the guid well water that has to be carried every drap up frae the Manse pump!" Nevertheless, in the fulness of time, she emerged a new woman, her way plain before her, and her resolve taken.

"Put out my best dress, the grey with the black braid," she said to Fleckie graciously. Fleckie was under training. She had so little work to do, so she complained, "that whiles she felt like dingin' doon the hoose." So Mina was teaching her to do the fine ironing, the mending, the brushing of her few dresses—all which for the present only cost Mina about three times as much trouble as if she had done them herself.

"I'm a terrible fash to ye, I ken," said Fleckie penitently, when she had had it explained to her for the third time that to spit on to a red-hot box-iron does not sufficiently provide against all accidents with delicate fabrics; "'deed I'm no sure but what I had better gang back to the byre. That saft frilly stuff like 'paddock-rid' roond the neck o' your sark is burnt fair cork-black! And ye'll be wantin' it for your braw London dress—to gang alang wi' it, I mean."

And Fleckie fairly burst into a boo-hoo of crying. Her manners had not that repose which enables women to cry gracefully into a handkerchief scarce larger than a postage stamp.

"Nonsense, Fleckie," said her mistress kindly, "what could I do without you? I think you are learning just wonderfully. And you know I am just beside myself when I see a mouse!"

"It's kind o' ye, mem; ye mean it weel," sobbed Fleckie, wiping the corners of her eyes with the nearest window curtain, "but what

will my Auntie Lummy Itherword say about the browned lace. The last time she caa'ed me 'a handless, guid-for-naething, misleared, feckless slunge, fit for naething but to claut the shairn frae the byre.' And *that* was only for breakin' an egg-cup! Faith, I believe she was richt, though! I'm no fit to be a house-lass. I should be wi' kye and nowt-beasts that can stand a dunt without breaking into bits."

"But, Fleckie," said her mistress, "we will say nothing at all about the piece of lace to your aunt. Go and get the dress out. I have a call to make this forenoon."

"It will no be to the Manse then," said Fleckie, becoming curious as soon as her contrition evaporated, "for the minister aye likes ye best in your black frock and white daidley."*

"Off with you, Fleckie, and leave me to my tea!"

* * * * *

It was about half-past eleven of the forenoon when Mina Fairweather turned up the little avenue of a hundred yards in length which separated Lady Grainger's house from the dusty Drumfern road. It had been ornamented, to do honour to its name, with some plants of the right *Genista* until a few days ago. But the night before Mina's visit to "Pitch-and-Toss," John Glencairn, who, like many others, cherished a strange secret grudge against the Broom Lodge

* Daidley, i.e., pinafore.

people, sent Allan Barnetson to clear the place out. Which task he had accomplished with great completeness and goodwill, to the immense disgust of the owner and her daughter. If they had known the purpose for which their broom blossom had been stolen, the wrath of the Graingers would have been multiplied a hundred fold.

Mina, having once taken her resolve, held tenaciously to it. Now when it came to the point she found herself cooler than she could have supposed.

"I wish to see Mademoiselle Jeanne Danicheff," she said as she stood at the open door of Broom Lodge.

If she had said the Man in the Moon the girl could not have looked more surprised.

"What's your wull?" she faltered.

"Miss Jeanne Danicheff," repeated Mina more clearly; "can I see her?"

"I'm a lassie frae Borgue," said the maid, her face very red and shiny; "I dinna understand langwages!"

But it chanced that a slight figure was flitting across the dusky space at the back of the hall at the moment of this colloquy. In a moment the "lassie frae Borgue" found herself pushed aside and Hilda Grainger stood in the half-open doorway.

"Go to the kitchen, girl," she commanded, and, half turning, she watched her go.

"And now," she said, with a curl of the lip which showed her white teeth, "what can I do for you—ah—Miss Hilliard, I believe?"

"My name," said Mina coldly, "is Mrs. Fairweather, as you very well know. And as for my business, I desire to see Mademoiselle Jeanne Danicheff, who, I understand, is at present residing with your mother, Lady Grainger."

Miss Hilda, from her stand on the upper step of the Broom Lodge front door flight, could now look down on her taller antagonist. She did this for some time before replying.

"I presume you mean Mrs. Terence Fairweather—my cousin Terry's widow. I am sorry you cannot see her. She left last night for the Riviera, her adopted country."

"I am your cousin Terry's widow," said Mina almost fiercely. "I and only I was his wife. I was married to him in the Manse of Creelport, by the minister of this parish, and I was with him till he died."

"Nevertheless," said the "Green Girl," smiling, "you were never really his wife—you are not his widow! And let me tell you this—you have been left in enjoyment of a pittance which is not yours solely by the forbearance of one who had the claims of a wife upon Terence Fairweather before ever he set eyes on you!"

"That is your story," said Mina. "It was, to a certain extent, also that told me by another. But I know Terry. I believe his silence before

either of your oaths. He would have kept nothing from me—still less a thing like that!”

“Ah, poor, poor thing, is that all you know of men?” cried the “Green Girl,” laughing aloud. “Why, even I know better than that, without having even pretended to be married!”

“Terry did not pretend—he was true!” said Mina, her heel tapping vehemently on the gravel. The “Green Girl” laughed. There was nothing sweeter in the world than to get the better of Mina Hilliard.

“What did you do with the packet of letters Hunter Mayne was fool enough to give you?” she asked presently.

“If the lady whom I—I wished to meet has gone there is no need to detain you,” said Mina, and with a slight bow she turned and walked away. But the “Green Girl” was by no means content to let her depart without a final flick of the scorpion’s tail.

She had a voice clean and hard as polished metal, and without raising it very much she reached Mina’s ear as she walked down the little avenue.

“We looked after his wife, my mother and I. We loved her—that is why Terry left us his money and cut you off with a pittance—which, indeed, after all, is only yours by charity—by *her* charity. I thought you would like to know.”

And for the first time in this history a flush of pleasure overspread the sallow features of the “Green Girl.” She, too, had her moments of happiness.



“ ‘ I thought you would like to know.’ ”

Little Esnon.]

(Page 174.)



CHAPTER XIV.

"OH, PUT YOUR TRUST IN ROBINSON!"

As Mina issued from the iron gate of Broom Lodge, which stood hospitably open to receive the carriages of the county people who never turned up there, she met Little Esson. It seemed a thing the more remarkable to Mina, because at the moment she was thinking what she would give to speak to someone who had known Terry longer than she—who had known him well, who had lived and travelled in his company; someone *not* Hunter Mayne, someone kind and whom she could trust—in short, Little Esson.

And, lo! there he was.

Mina did not hide her astonishment or her pleasure. She held out her hand, saying, "Why, this is quite providential! Do you know I was just thinking about you and wishing I could see you."

Little Esson said that he thought it was providential, too, and hoped that the lump those abominable field-glasses made in the side-pocket of his reefer jacket might not be noticed.

"And I was thinking of *you*," he added at once truthfully and gallantly.

At another time and from another than Little Esson, Mina might have resented the compliment, but Esson had an engaging little hesitation in his voice—the remains of a stammer which had afflicted him in youth. It gave an air of false innocence and childlike shyness to his deepest villainies, and stood him in great stead with women generally.

"How strange," repeated Mina, contented to see the face of a friend in whom was no guile—or at least none of the "Green Girl" sort. "I was just thinking of you!"

And lest this might sound too unlike herself, she quickly qualified it by saying, "And Terry used to speak so often about you, too—oftener than about all the others put together."

Little Esson nodded, and also sighed. He sighed because he thought she might have left him in his error a little longer.

"Yes," he said with feeling, "Terry was a man. There were no flies on Terry anywhere."

He spoke with deep and real sympathy, but that was the particular brand of slang in vogue in "Pitch-and-Toss" at the time. However, Mina understood. She had long been free of the guild.

"If someone told you a mean thing, a cruel thing that Terry had done, you would not believe it, would you?"

"Of course not," said Little Esson stoutly. "What sort of a mean thing?"

"About a woman!" said Mina, with a hardening of the voice which was quite instinctive.

"Ah!" remarked Little Esson not quite so enthusiastically. He knew that no man can answer for his brother when it comes to *that*. But still Little Esson was staunch to his dead friend.

"Some lies, no doubt," he said easily. "They have been talking to you up there?" And he pointed to Broom Lodge with his thumb over his shoulder.

Mina nodded sadly and her lips quivered.

"And Hunter Mayne!" she added.

Little Esson said something below his breath, and the muttered ejaculation his lips expressed with regard to Hunter Mayne probably went unregistered by the Recording Angel, who, doubtless, at that moment scratched his head with his pen and turned his deaf side.

"What was that you said?" Mina asked. She had been thinking of something else.

"Ah—hem," said Little Esson, "I was saying that if they had anything to say against poor old Terry, they need not have waited till Terry was dead."

Instinctively they had turned down the shore road. It was a narrow way, sheltered on one side by birch copses and bluish-green plantations of spruce fir, and with the gulls and the terns sweeping and crying out on the brown tidal flats of the Dee water, which glanced in the sun like oiled

paper, while the dotterel and curlew pattered stiffly about in the middle-distance pools—nobody nearer to them than the Red Haven, a couple of miles away.

Mina, instantly in need of a friend to tell her trouble to, turned on Little Esson, and put out her hands to him.

"They say I am not his wife," she said, the tears welling in her eyes for the first time.

Little Esson stared at her. Surely grief had turned her brain.

"No, no," he said soothingly, "they cannot say that. Why, I saw you married myself, and all the time I cursed the day I was born——"

"Never mind about that," said Mina, hastily withdrawing her hands. "But it is true all the same. They say Terry was married before he knew me—or at least betrothed—in Germany, I think, or Russia—and that it has the same value there in the eyes of the law as if he had been married."

"Terry married before—what nonsense! Who says so? Somebody is having a game. Who is the girl?" cried Little Esson, asking half a dozen questions in as many seconds.

"Hilda Grainger says it—hatefully," said Mina. "Hunter Mayne says it too—I think, as kindly as he can. He means to help me."

Here Little Esson snorted.

"Yes," said Mina gently, "I believe he does—he at least has nothing to gain. The girl," Mina's

voice suddenly shook with anger, "she is different. She's a *Green-She-Cat*!"

And she ground her little heel deep down among the crunching pebbles of the shore.

"*Curly-oo! Leeooo-leeooo-leeooo!*" piped a whaup passing low overhead, and save for its strange cry, silently as a spirit on the wing.

They reached a tree well known to both of them. The neighbourhood of Creelpport-on-Dee is dotted with ancient thorn trees, mostly standing single in pasture lands, half rubbed away by sheep till the rough bark is polished like ebony. One of these, a little way back from the shore, stretched out a broad coil of trunk, parallel with the ground and about two feet above it. Leaves and blossom nestled up behind. Before were the sea and the gulls dipping and slanting in the sunshine. The place was sacred to "Pitch-and-Toss." They had annexed it years ago. So these two sat down, Mina and Little Esson, and looked away from each other.

"Tell me," said Esson, "*all*."

And Mina told him all that Hunter Mayne had said—that first, and then about the letters. She described how she had gone that morning to Broom Lodge, and the last biting words which Hilda Grainger had called after her. Esson listened gravely, pecking a hole in the ground with his toe.

"And the letters?" he suggested when she had finished. "I suppose I cannot see them?"

"N-o-o-o!" said Mina, flushing; "the fact is——"

"Surely you did not burn them?" cried Esson suddenly.

"No, I buried them," she was blushing now. "I *hated* them so! And they were nice letters, too, to tell the truth—only, you see, they were from another girl—and to Terry!"

"Jeanne Danicheff—Jeanne Danicheff!" muttered Little Esson. "Why, I have seen that girl—I have talked to her!"

"You—you——" gasped Mina, moving a little further from him along the trunk of the thorn tree. "When—where? Why did you not tell me?"

"Why, not very long ago—at Broom Lodge—I never thought any more about it," said Little Esson, shamefaced in his turn. "I went with Frobisher, Hunter Mayne's friend. It was about a picture—about selling it, I mean."

"Oh," said Mina, rising, "I thought you at least were altogether on my side!"

"So I am—so I am!" cried Esson, alarmed at the wonderful workings of feminine logic. "Sit down—I can tell you——"

"I don't want to hear any more."

"But I can tell you what she is like," said Little Esson, who was not quite a fool.

"I don't want to hear," said Mina, seating herself notwithstanding.

"Why, she is a laughing girl, plump and

jolly," said Little Esson, "and to look at as innocent as a—as a pouter pigeon."

He concluded abruptly with the comparison which recalled the most prominent characteristic of Mademoiselle Jeanne, which a draughtsman like Little Esson remembered.

"You liked her?" said Mina bitterly, her fingers fiddling nervously with the little gold buttons of her black shell jacket. Esson coughed slightly.

"Well," he said apologetically, "of course I knew nothing about this at the time, and, to tell the truth, she didn't look the sort of girl to be harbouring dark and terrible revenges. Besides, she was great fun."

"Good-bye, Mr. Esson. No, thank you, I can easily find my way back alone."

Esson actually caught Mina by the arm as she was marching off, her chin very much in the air.

"No, don't go like that," he said authoritatively. "You have known me a long time, Mina. You know I want to help you about this. And I think I can. Let me. I believe there are a good many lies about. I smell 'em."

"Whose lies?" said Mina, still only half appeased.

Little Esson did not dare to say whose lies he believed they were, nor what was his theory, if indeed he had one. Very wisely he confined himself to general observations, and the signature of a treaty of alliance with Mina Fairweather, both offensive and defensive.

"Mina," he said, "look here. You know I don't beat about the bush. You let me have those letters, and give me *carte blanche* to pry into your affairs. I believe I could find out something. I was born to be a detective, but having been changed at nurse, or something, up till now I've always missed my chance. And, look here, don't believe any harm of poor old Terry. He isn't here to speak up for himself, you know, and I—I'll swear he was always right-angled as a T square with both you and me."

"Thank you," said Mina, "but I don't think I could possibly dig up these letters—I shiver and turn sick only when I think of them! I wish they were covered up twice as deep."

"Well," said Little Esson readily, "there's no need that you should. You tell me where they are, and I'll hike them out in the crack of a whip, in less time than I take to spoil a picture. Show me on the back of this envelope just where you stowed them. That's the way the detectives all do."

Mina, as well as she could, indicated the spot, and Little Esson, placing the document in his breast-pocket with all the solemn secrecy of a chief of police, walked back with her to within sight of the first cottage of the town of Creelport.

"Mind," he said, "there's some game on we don't know of. But, anyway, don't be hard upon poor old Terry. He was only a man, and he may have recreated a bit—she was that sort

of girl. But one thing I do know, he would never have married you so long as he thought anybody else had the ghost of a claim on him!"

"Good-bye," he cried again, gaily, as she turned to go without answering. "I'm on it—I'm going to detect so that nobody shall be able to tie their shoe-strings, but I will get to the bottom of what they mean by it. Only I must have those letters first. It was under an elm, I think you said?"

"An elm," smiled Mina; "at least, I believe so. But please remember it is a very serious matter to me."

Little Esson stood still, gazed a moment at the girl, and then walked directly back to her.

"And so it is to me," he said.

* * * * *

"That is all very well," said Mina to herself, as she regained her room without Fleckie seeing her, "but it does not explain whether or no I have any right to take the portion which belongs to Terry's widow. And then there is all that French money! Thank goodness I have never touched so much as a farthing of that. That's one comfort."

Then presently from without, thin and airy as the crowing of a cock in the morn at a distant farm, there came to her ear the voice of Little Esson cheerfully chanting the refrain of a ditty exceedingly popular in "Pitch-and-Toss":—

"Oh, put your trust in Robinson,
And he will pull you through!"

CHAPTER XV.

A GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

IT was in the nature of things that, with so many people interested in the private affairs of Mina Fairweather, her name should serve as a sort of rallying flag to one of the little bickerings which made life in Creelport endurable. All the artistic colony swore by her; the Broom Lodge contingent swore *at* her. It was immediately understood that there was a dark mystery somewhere. The scene in the studio, loyally kept secret for many months, suddenly became public property, and Miss Hilda Grainger remarked, with sweet serenity, that this was not the way respectable girls with nothing to conceal made choice of husbands—to “fling themselves at the head of the first comer like that.” *She* would not do such a thing.

Most evenings Hunter Mayne was a frequent visitor at Lady Grainger's. That is, he called upon her daughter. For when Miss Hilda had visitors, being modern of an extreme modernity, she simply said to her mother, “You can go

upstairs, mamma!" And the black satin obediently puffed and rustled away, glad to be rid of the responsibility of her daughter, or rather of the state of nerves into which Hilda's manner of speech threw her. Lady Grainger did not understand more than one-third of what her daughter said. For, as she often plaintively repeated, "she did not pretend to be clever, and, of course, in her young days no girls at all ever had dear Hilda's opportunities."

It was a thing agreed between Miss Hilda and Hunter Mayne that no one should know of his visits. For though on the surface there was an appearance of what Creelport knew as "an entanglement" between themselves, the position was clearly enough defined. Miss Hilda, a young woman of no illusions, saw to that herself.

"It looks too much as if you were 'coming courting,'" she said, after she had let him in by the sea-door, as it was called—that which opened across a little lawn out upon rusty salt-flats only covered by the spring tides; "quite dairy-maidish, indeed! That is, if anyone saw you—which they don't."

She lit a cigarette as she spoke, and pushed the box towards him.

"But you and I have seen too much," she added, as she scratched a vesta upon the sole of her boot and held it towards him to light up, touching her little finger to his with a well-accustomed air.

"And, besides, I am too ugly!" She laid her finger upon her sallow cheek, on which her rounded brow deepened the shadow. "Overcerebrated," she said bitterly; "that's fatal to a girl, you know. It is a pity that I was not born a dolly like the rest. But," here she puffed half a dozen thick jets of smoke rapidly and then threw the cigarette in the fire, "at least I can play at 'Lady Bountiful,' with the pretty-pretties for puppets and all Creelport for a stage."

"Why do you hate her so much?" said the young man, as, with the ease which one man takes in the presence of another, he crossed his legs and, leaning back, looked straight at Hilda Grainger. She was more than ever the "Green Girl" that evening. Her neutral-tinted blouse had an air of the gymnasium. The straight skirt, cut short and high, with the heavy boots, though these were neat enough, showed plainly that Hilda Grainger was superior to some at least of the more gracious weaknesses of her sex.

"Why do I hate her so much?" She sat on the arm of a sofa, chintz-covered, stained with ink and chemicals. "I presume that by 'her' you mean—as everything masculine does here in Creelport—Miss Mina Hilliard, late sick-nurse to my dear and lamented cousin and benefactor, Mr. Terence Fairweather?"

She seized another cigarette, cut it deftly in

half, and lighted it at a little Bunsen burner which stood on a movable work-table at her elbow. Then she inhaled as before, with great rapidity, and for some time continued to speak as through a kind of haze of smoke which seemed to exude from every pore.

"Why do I hate Mina Hilliard?" she repeated through this breathing fog. "Well, first, admitting that I do hate her, I think it must be because every man of you thinks and speaks of that silly chit as 'her.' Why should she be 'her' any more than I? Do you ever speak of me as 'her'—even you?"

"You have all the qualities, Hilda," said Hunter Mayne, smiling, "but I hesitate to think of the fate of the man who would be bold enough to make love to you. A band-saw would by comparison be considered sympathetic and tender."

"Thanks," said the girl, stretching herself at ease on a long cane chair. "Give the struts of that foot-rest a kick out, Hunter. Thanks, again. I was made ugly by no will of my own—ugly and clever. God, or Darwin, Mr. Herbert Spencer, or some grand-grand-grand-parent of a chimpanzee far up my family tree arranged it so. I ought, I know, to be mild and forgiving, of a good reliable domestic type—'never - a-moment's - anxiety - to - anybody,' 'jelly - and-soup - to - the - poor' sort of a girl, oughtn't I? And I should believe all that the parsons hammer out weekly, and be kind and forgiving and

benevolent—oh, I know. That's what men really like. They grow such girls from seed in this country like turnips, so many indeed that they need thinning. It is all very nice, very proper, very ordinary, and all that is necessary to make everybody love you. Only—I was not built to be that sort of a girl. See?"

"I see," said Hunter Mayne through the haze which was drifting in his direction.

"No," said Hilda, "I am clearly some cast-back to pre-Christian, or even pre-Pagan times. The formulas don't grip me. I hold no more to the Good of the Race, or the Greatest Good of the Greatest Number, than I do to the pulpit commonplaces about self-sacrifice and the law of love. I see no reason why, if I want a thing, I should not take it. If I want to do a thing, why I should not do it. Little prettyish 'Baa-Lamb' comes in the way, so much the worse for 'Baa-Lamb'! Of course, if my instinct is to strike down what I dislike, I don't do it with my hand. Nature and the ages have robbed that of talons. Neither am I mediæval—I don't take to a knife. There are, for the present, certain laws and a general policing of the world, useful enough to people who like it. Besides, I am clever enough not to need bowl and dagger. And then, you know, the sport of 'Baa-Lamb' hunting needs the difficulties provided by the laws to make it interesting. Otherwise it would be too ridiculously easy."

"Do you mean to let Mina alone now?" said Hunter Mayne, looking at the glowing end of his cigarette.

"That is what I was proposing to ask you," said the girl, indolently. "I play with 'Baa-Lamb' because 'Baa-Lamb' annoys me. She drinks down there out of the brook that passes my door. Also because she is pretty, and fools (including you, my dear Hunter) run after her. She is silly, and yet married Terry when we might have had all his father's money to live on—Heaven only knows what the old brute did with it all. Then I could have gone back to Cambridge or to London, and had a laboratory all my own, where I should have experimented, perhaps even blown myself up, and existed happily in Nirvana ever after. But 'Baa-Lamb' must come along, and, lo! Terry jumps at her as if she had been a red-and-blue painted spinning-minnow with a hook in its tail. Hang Terry!"

"And how about your friend Mademoiselle Danicheff?" said Hunter Mayne, smiling at the girl's vehemence. "Is there going to be anything in that for either of us?"

"For me, yes," said the "Green Girl"; "for you, it depends on what you want—that is, if you are not a fool. But, then, it is all too certain that you are, being a man. I thank the gods, the very oldest gods, the gods of 'Each-for - himself - and - the - devil - take - the - hind-

most,' that I was not born as most men are, fools and blind, to be tagged at the end of a few pink ribbons by an empty-pated girl."

"Mina affects blue," said the young man. "I know, because I've painted her so often!"

"Hunter," said the girl scornfully, yet not without a certain amused tolerance, "you are like the rest—no whit better, except perhaps that you can hold your tongue. Talking of Mademoiselle Jeanne, it was as well that she went when she did. For who should come bleating after her yesterday but 'Baa-Lamb' herself—yes, the only pretty 'Baa-Lamb' as ever was—with that little ass of a painter hovering about in the background. Then after that they went and wove daisy chains and danced around the May-pole in the Town Meadows. I watched them go. They all but took hands."

"Little Esson, you mean," said Hunter Mayne, with a sneer. "Well, Esson paints like a cherub; he can't help it. But for the rest, he won't worry us."

"If that notable painter, Mr. Hunter Mayne, whose art suffers from his trying to be also a man of the world—and whose need of money is perennial—would only make up his mind as to what *he* wants with 'Baa-Lamb,' his faithfully here present might be able to decide more clearly what remains to be done."

"Hilda," said the young man, with a certain earnestness, "I value the privilege of coming

here to talk to you beyond anything in the world——”

“Chut!” cried the girl, “turn off that shandy-gaff! Speak out, will you? Say what you mean. You don’t by any chance cherish the idea of marrying me, if Terry’s money-bags prove heavy enough or your own sufficiently light? No; well, that at least is candid. But then, you see, I don’t want you either, my gallant Lord Ronald; so we are quits. I should gladly enough have married Terry, because it was quite evident he was going to die. But you—no, I thank you! I have no ambition to be hung for murder, though I do believe I could do it without a soul finding out. So far, good! That clears the decks. Very well, then, what do you want with the ‘Baa-Lamb’? Do you propose to marry her the second time of asking?”

For a moment Hunter Mayne was visibly perturbed. The “Green Girl” watched him warily. He seemed to hesitate and search for words.

“No money, is it?” she queried. “Does the vile metal prevent the union of two hearts that beat as one? Horrid of Terry Fairweather to cut his faithful nurse off with a hovel and some chickens. Have *you* no aspirations after love in a cottage, Mr. Hunter Mayne, even with *her*?”

“Hilda,” said Mayne at last, “I don’t suppose you will understand me, but——”

"Ah, indeed; then your soul is so exquisitely subtle!" said the girl.

"No," he continued; "but—there are two sides to every man's nature—though it may not seem so to you, Hilda."

"Oh, the two sides," said Hilda wearily; "I am sick of them. You can skip the theory and come to the practice. I am good at prolepsis. I suppose what you really want is to give your mornings to art, your evenings to me, and to spend your afternoons and Sundays out, dissipating in the shade at the feet of 'Baa-Lamb?' Does that express this wonderful twin-nature of yours?"

"Well," said Hunter Mayne, "I—I—I don't deny it. Mina does appeal to me. We don't use the word 'love' since you don't like it."

"There *are* other synonyms, and more exact ones, too, for what you want to say," purred the "Green Girl," with her thin lips curled so as to show the fine line of her small even teeth.

"I am trying to explain," said Hunter Mayne, "if you will but listen. You make it difficult enough. I know I am a big, blundering fellow alongside of you. But the truth is, that ever since I knew you the privilege of coming here and talking to you——"

"What, talking to a person devoid of all moral considerations?" interrupted the girl, blowing rings of smoke slantwise to the ceiling.

"Has been my greatest pleasure. I don't

want to marry Mina Fairweather and lose that."

"Mina who?" asked Hilda Grainger softly.

"Well, you know," went on Hunter Mayne. "I don't want to marry her at *that* price. But then again, I don't want her to marry anyone else. There is a side of my nature——"

"Oh, not again!" cried Hilda Grainger. "Three I can't stand—and won't. That would be triangular. We will take the other odd sides of your nature for granted. They are quite common—among the lower animals!"

"No," repeated Hunter Mayne doggedly, "I can't marry Mina. I am not rich enough, at any rate—besides, I value my evenings with you too much!"

The girl glanced keenly at him, a curious diffused light coming into her eyes which had not been there before. But in an instant she was drolling again.

"Yes," she said, "the cigarettes are not bad at Broom Lodge, and the liquid refreshment good of its kind. Mamma is no trouble. And as for me, I am pleased to be of service to such an unselfish and noble-natured young man—that is, to one side of his nature, even if it is reserved for the 'Baa-Lamb'——"

"You misjudge me, as always," interrupted Hunter. "It is for your sake—for the sake of your society——"

"That you wish to play Mr. Dog-in-the-Manger

to the 'Baa-lamb'! 'I can't marry you, my pretty maid, because, most unfortunately, I've got another side to my Noble Nature!' But then, to make up, I won't allow anyone else to marry you either!' Are these your sentiments?"

"Hilda, you never will be serious," complained Hunter, flinging himself back pettishly in his chair.

"On the contrary, I never was more so," said the girl. "It is a blessing you have no more sides to your nature, my most expansive youth! What if you had sixteen, like the banyan tree, with an unfortunate girl clinging to each one, and all condemned never to marry because it stimulated you to associate with the other fifteen?"

Hunter was beaten, and he did what was, perhaps, the wisest thing — he surrendered at discretion.

"I will do just what you like and as you like it," he said. "I know I am not nearly so clever as you are. Hang it, you can talk all round me."

"My dear fellow, now you are becoming sensible," said Hilda, leaning her head on her hand; "psychology and self-analysis are not your *forte*. Listen, I will put things plainly. There is money somewhere behind Terry's will. The girl you refer to as 'she' knows where it is. Now, I want that money, to make a life worth living for *me*. Therefore, I don't desire Mistress Mina to marry again. You, Mr. Hunter Mayne, don't want her to marry, for the reasons which you expressed so lucidly a moment ago. So far, therefore, we are perfectly

A GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

agreed, you and I. And the weapon we have put in our hands to prevent her marrying is Jeanne Cheff, safe now at Nice, but all the more serviceable on account of that. Mistress Mina won't marry again while this hangs over her head. At present she is neither flesh, fish, nor good red herring. Meantime, she will be friendly with you, because you have detached her affections from the old Terry, and Baa-Lambs must have some good masculine on hand with which to bleat at a chance. Furthermore, I have no objections to your coming here to report progress of an evening's conversation, the brightness of your intelligence, your ready wit stimulate me. Another drink? No? No? No? evade, depart—go! Think what a bad example it would be to my lady's servants, and how it would prejudice you with the 'Baa-Lamb,' if you only knew. So long! till to-morrow night.

"That girl is the devil," muttered I Mayne, as he went through the sea-door of the Lodge, "and yet——"



CHAPTER XVI.

THE MIDNIGHT DETECTIVE.

"I'm sure I don't know how it is I never thought of taking to this detective racket before," said Little Esson, as he cautiously drew on his golfing shoes with the india-rubber soles. "I might have made a big thing of it. Here are all these fellows asleep—yonder is 'Fuzzy' snoring like a red-headed Grand Turk on the kitchen locker, and never one of them has an idea that I am about to peril my life digging up buried treasure—or letters, which is just the same thing. I wonder if I ought to take a dark lantern? It seems the right thing."

This deep question was decided for him by the remembrance of the fact that there was no lantern of any sort among all the miscellaneous rubbish which encumbered Pitch-and-Toss.

But on the back of this, another difficulty cropped up.

"She marked it on that letter, certainly," he said, spreading a crumpled envelope on the table before him; "but it was an HHHH pencil, and it's nearly rubbed out now. That was kissing

it, I suppose. What a foolish place to keep an important thing like that! I really thought, Archibald Esson, that you had got more sense!"

And he pressed the paper again to his lips.

"I wish, though, it had not been an HHHH," he said; "I must think of that next time. Do you turn to the right, or to the left when you come to the twiddle there? She has marked it 'Yew Tree Glade.' Oh, the darling—the sweetest—um-m-m! Now that's gone, and I shall never know. Well, heigh-ho! the thing has got to be put through somehow, and the quicker the better. Not one of the other fellows would dream of such a deed—lying snoring there, the blockheads, when I am venturing my life—for the girl—the girl we all love, but whom not one of us is worthy to black the boots of. Where's something to dig with? Oh, the palette knife—that is, if I can't find that 'spud.' Hush, what was that? 'A rat behind the arras.' Dowse the glim, Archie! Where's the blessed matches? 'I go to bury Cæsar, not to praise him.' I mean to dig him up!"

Manifestly Little Esson was in high spirits. For the first time in his life he had been "you and I" to the Idol of Pitch-and-Toss. For the first time also he had been chosen, all alone, to do her a service.

Egypt was not darker during the three days when the people saw not one another, neither rose any from his place, than was the deep dark in which Little Esson wrapped his present intentions.

He closed the door gently behind him. Pitch-and-Toss did not boast a key, there being nothing to steal except masterpieces of modern art—and Creelport infinitely preferred the oleographs on its merchant's Christmas almanacks as being "mair cheery-like."

The night policeman was wandering drearily round, looking for somebody to pass the time-of-night with, but Esson avoided him as if he had been a blood-stained assassin fleeing from the scene of his crime. He scanned the shore-line rapidly. In the back windows of Broom Lodge he saw a solitary light burning. Then a door opened, and a tall, oblong lamp threw a yellow search-light far over the salt marshes. To Little Esson all the world that night was full of dark and bloody secrets. He watched eagerly, but the glare of light frightened himself. He ducked instinctively; his foot slipped, and down he went into a muddy tide-lane. Grasping at something with which to pull himself out, he caught at a prickle of sea-holly, which came away in his hand. The prickles, however, remained, and the whole mischance interested Little Esson so much that he had no time to see who issued from the door of Broom Lodge till it was shut again, and the light in the ground floor room mounted slowly upstairs, showing parti-coloured through the sham stain-glass of the staircase window.

The best way to reach the Manse garden, Little Esson reflected, was to follow the shore, avoiding

the far-reaching lanes and the pitfalls lined with sea-holly ; then over the dyke into the kirkyard, and so by the little green door, through which Dr. John passed twice a day on Sundays, arrayed in magnificent apparel and with a pomp of manner quite foreign to his week-day habit. That would bring him safe upon the scene of his attempt, without attracting the least attention. Esson only wished that he had not quite so many prickles in his palms. He never knew before that sea-holly was such a disgusting plant. But the sense that he was nearing the cottage wherein dwelt the Idol, the Pride, nerved him wonderfully. The air seemed different somehow, more balmy, sheltered, caressing. Hitherto, he had always liked the wild exposed position of Pitch-and-Toss, near the tumble of the sea on the pebbles, and with the sweep of all the winds of heaven about it. But now Little Esson began to think that he had made a mistake. The vicinity of the Manse of Creelport was his only joy. Ghosts after all were cheerful things, and if you tripped over a tombstone—well, it taught you the lesson of your frail humanity, and also something as to the limits of a merely human vocabulary.

But at last he entered the precincts of the Manse garden through the little green door. It stood unlocked, and the yew-tree walk closed dark and dank upon him. This was far weirder even than the open kirkyard, and the big, pallid kirk cutting across the faint midsummer drift of stars. How

damp and humid a yew-grove smells at night ! Little Esson sniffed. Curious he had never noticed that before ! He scented something else, too, and moistened his nostrils with a swift application of detective craft that he might smell the better. All the Dog-rib and Yellow-knife Indians did that in the books about the Nor'-west.

He smelt something very distinct from the perfume of dank yew-hedges. It was a burning fusee—nothing more and nothing less. After the manner of a good detective, and also jealous as a faithful dog in what concerned his mistress, he rapidly put two and two together. The only man who still used fusees in Creelport was Hunter Mayne. He got them in some seaport town on his way to Holland, and he always lit his pipe with them.

But what was Hunter Mayne doing there at that hour ? Little Esson's crest fairly bristled. Quills upon the fretful porcupine were velvety by comparison. He, too, was after the letters ! He had given them to Mina—and now, having found out that she had buried them, Hunter Mayne was doubtless trespassing on the property of the good Dr. John for the nefarious purpose of stealing them.

Esson thought of going instantly and arousing the sleeping Manse, Insolence ! It was mere robbery ! He had passed the policeman on the way ; indeed, he knew him well. It would serve Hunter Mayne right—— !

But hold ; was he not himself there with the very same intent ? Besides, the letters were Mina's—or, at least, Mina wanted them. He would, as he said, " do a bit of stalking."

" Easy does it," muttered Little Esson under his breath. " Lucky I am not a great porpoise of a fellow, or I never could have got through that hedge and up this plum-tree ! "

The said plum-tree was the identical damson which overhung Mina's cottage garden, and whose produce, later on in the season, could most readily be gathered from her side of the fence.

And now, crawling cautiously out upon the branch, Little Esson could command a view of the white cottage of the departed Dickie, its windows all dark, only the least peep of red in the kitchen window showing where Fleckie had placed the " keeping coal " for the morning. To-morrow was washing day, and Fleckie always liked to have her water hot, good and early.

Further over there, in the darkness, was another loom of red, a very small, moving dot on the road in front, beyond the garden, beyond the low outer hedge. Esson sniffed and had it. A long studio apprenticeship stood him in good stead. The red glow, stoppered at intervals by a deft and fire-proof little finger, was Mayne, smoking his pipe out on the road in front of the Idol's house ?

What right had he to be there ? The insolent hound ! On such occasions a lover, even one who, like Little Esson, loved on behalf of a whole

confraternity, forgets that the public road is free to all ratepayers, and even (if so be that they move on when ordered) to those with no visible means of support. Certainly the king's highway was free to Hunter Mayne on both counts. All the same, it was, as Esson said over and over to himself, "blank cheek." He bethought him what he could do. A large kennel of very fierce dogs at the gable of Dickie's cottage would just about have met his wishes for Hunter Mayne at that moment.

But this could not be. One's highest aspirations have often to submit to the brutality of fact. At any rate, Hunter Mayne was not on the track of the letters. On the contrary, he was peacefully enjoying the night air, while smoking his pipe and looking thoughtfully up at the stars, or maybe at the window's of Mina's cottage. Esson watched him sulkily for half-an-hour, and then, warned by the clock of the parish church striking one, he decided that as Hunter Mayne evidently meant no harm, so far as that night was concerned, he himself had better go and get the letters.

So, back to the fork of the Yew-Tree Avenue he groped his way. Alas! Mina, with feminine ignorance of cartography, had forgotten to warn him that on Dr. John's policies there were *two* Yew-Tree Avenues, and as for elm-trees, they seemed simply without number. Little Esson reflected with contempt on the lack of intelligence shown by the landscape gardener, who knew no



“ ‘ Aye, then, hae I gotten ye, ye crawling thief ? ’ ”

Little Esson.]

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better than thus to cumber a poor minister's garden with useless and unproductive vegetable growths of that kind.

"Aye, then, hae I gotten ye, ye crawling thief o' the world," cried a voice in Little Esson's ear, just as at last he grasped the packet of letters, "And wi' Dr. John's ain 'spud!' Come your ways to the poliss-station, my man. I hae been watchin' ye for this twa hours, and losin' my beauty sleep ower the heid o' ye. Come your ways, ye feckless land-louper. Mony a day's oakum-picking ye'll get, that will fit ye better than stealing into honest folk's yairds at the dead o' nicht!"

Thus spoke Fleckie Itherword, gripping Little Esson by the neck, and hauling him towards the Manse back-kitchen window, at which her aunt waited ready to participate in the honours of the fray.

"Shove him aboot half-road through, Fleckie," said a well-known voice, "and I'll let the window-sash doon on him. Then let him kick his bravest."

"Aye, that I will, like feedin' a sheaf o' corn into Andro Banchory's threshin' mill," said the powerful Fleckie promptly.

"But, Guid save us, what's this?" cried Lummy from within. "I declare, if it's no juist Maister Airchie Esson, the penter laddie, that Miss Bee nursed when he had the brain fever! Hae ye 'gotten it again, laddie, that ye are gangin' stravaigin' athort the country at this time o' nicht? Daft callant that ye are. And what in

the name o' wonder are ye doing wi' Dr. John's spud ? "

" Set me on my feet," said Esson a little indignantly, " and I will tell you."

" Come in, Fleckie, and hear," said her aunt, dusting Esson down vigorously.

" 'Deed then, that will I no'," said Mina's giant handmaiden, " there may be mae o' them, wha kens ? I wadna lit them past it. Daft artist loons rinnin' aboot wi' spuds, howkin' for goold and silver and precious stones amang the Doctor's syboes ! "

It appeared to Esson that he had better tell the truth. His opinion of his own powers as a detective officer was scarcely so high as it had been.

" I came to find some letters for Mrs. Fairweather—for your mistress," he said, addressing Fleckie through the open window, as Lummy continued officially to dust him down ; " you had better go and ask her what she wishes done with them."

" 'Deed, and that will I no' ! " said the obstinate Fleckie. " I wadna waken a puir lass oot o' her sleep at two o' the mornin' for a wheen letters. For aught I ken, they may only be the merchant's accoonts ye canna pay. I hae heard o' you artists lads ! ' Na-na, kimmer, quo he ! ' "

" After all, perhaps you are right, Fleckie," said Esson, willing to placate the " Idol's " guardian angel. " Lummy, your good aunt here, will vouch for me that I have no evil intentions."

"'Deed, I'll warrant him as to that," said Lummy, "whatever else he may be, Maister Esson's nae thief. Forbye bein' a kennin' ower fond o' the lasses, I never heard a word again' the laddie."

"I'm no sayin' that is a sair faut mysel'," answered Fleckie stoutly. "For me, I like nane o' your sleekit messans that are keepit on the chain and their brose brocht to them ilka day. Gie me a guid weel-appointit tyke that louns dykes and gets hunted oot o' half a dozen stack-yairds ilka nicht! Only hear ye this, young man—if ye come again aboot Dickie Dickson's cottage in the dark, under cloud o' nicht as it were, ye are liable to get your back broken! There are nocht but twa lone weemen there, mind ye that—and, as Fleckie Itherword has a character to maintain, she will mak' haggis an' herring-banes o' ony unhaltered loon that comes here stravaigin' and giein' the hoose a bad name."

With these words Esson, much crest-fallen, was left alone with Lummy Itherword, that woman of wise counsel.

"Na," she said, in answer to a question, "Fleckie will no say a word aboot whaur she fand ye. She wad be ashamed, ye see. She thinks that every man is like her auld maister, Andro Banchory, when women are concerned. As the psalm-buik says—

"Wha's mouth lest he come near to them
A bridle maun command!"

"But I was really doing Mrs. Fairweather a service," explained Esson to Lummy Itherword.

"Dootless—dootless," replied Lummy drily; "but, ye see, young and bonny lasses are kittle-cattle to do services to. And it will maybe be as weel to keep oot o' trees that grow under windows, and to come decently to the front door in braid daylight to do your bits o' services! No' but what I suppose daft laddies will be daft laddies to the end o' time."

"I had not the least intention——" began Esson, feeling himself most grievously misunderstood.

"I dare say no," said Lummy; "but after Miss Bee's giein' ye a quiet hour by yourself's in the parlour there, surely ye couldna be in ony siccan turrivee to speak again wi' the lass. Besides, ye mistake her, sair. She's no that kind, whatever she may ha'e been in her young, daft days. It's my candid belief that she wad raither talk a forenicht wi' Dr. John and Miss Bee than play at bogle wi' ony young artist skelpie o' ye a'!"

Esson was now only anxious to be gone, as the day gave unmistakable signs of breaking. Evidently Lummy would not be persuaded of the impeccability of his intentions—no, not if an angel from heaven had come down and borne him witness. But she was tolerant. Nay, it even seemed as if he had risen in her opinion as well as in that of Fleckie.

"Aye, but ye are the bauld youngster," said Lummy, "I declare, I didna think ye had it in ye, Maister Airchie Esson! But mind, nae mair

o't! I'll get Dr. John oot o' the road—he has twa or three veesitations in the heid-end o' the pairish that will tak' him the feck o' next week. And if me and Miss Bee canna mak' better chances for speakin' quaitely to a young lass than rinnin' about at nicht like a cat on the house-rigging—weel, ye dinna deserve to hae decent auld wives like me takkin' trouble for ye, that's a'! I aye thocht ye couldna be the man—ye were sae mim and douce. But, faith, I'm beginning to think noo that I may be mista'en. It's the daft speerity loons that the lasses like, great and little, young and auld. And if she kenned that ye were trappit like a robber and near brak' your neck-bone tryin' to win in at her winnock-sole—dod, I do think that ye micht hae a chance yet! But ye had better leave it to me and Miss Bee, laddie. And when ye are nippit again, see and hae a mair faceable story ready to your hand than that ye were howkin' letters that Miss Mina had buried at the foot o' a tree! Na, a barefaced lee like that disna show ye to be a man o' ony invention. Ye'll get nae credit by sic a tale. What for couldna ye juist hae said that ye wanted to see the lass hersel', and hae stickit to it? That wad hae been far mair faceable like—and forbye, naebody wad hae thocht the waur o' ye—you bein' an artist, as it were! There's nae better expectit o' them!”

Little Esson passed over this slur upon an honourable profession, and repeated that he must be going.

"Aweel," said Lummy, "I'm an auld woman, and I daresay I should be thinkin' o' mair serious things. But—I will own I like a daft callant that's ready to pit his craig (neck) in peril for a lass. Ye can see the Manse back-kitchen window frae the brae aboon your bit sheiling, can ye no?"

"Yes," said Esson, his colour sense helping him to remember, "it has a red blind."

"Weel," said Lummy, "when the lass ye ken o' is comin' to tak' her tea wi' Miss Bee, the red blind will be half-road doon. When it is doon a' thegither, she will be sittin' a' by her lane on the seat in the minister's wee plantation, and ye can come up through the kirk-yaird yett, as ye did the nicht, withoot a soul being the wiser. But nae mair climbing on trees like a hunted pussy-bawdrons (cat) wi' the dogs after her. And nae raising o' the neighbourhood oot o' its bed at twa o'clock o' the mornin'! Promise me that!"

Esson promised faithfully, eager only to be off. Lummy accompanied him to the green door, which opened into the churchyard.

"I'm riskin' my character, I ken," she said, "but at five-and-fifty lasses' characters begin to be mair weather-proof than they are at twa-and-twenty. Sae let Mistress Mina alane, except when the back kitchen blind says ye may come and coort her decently in the licht o' day. The like o' this may be no sae romantical, Airchie Esson, but I'll wager ye will get a deal mair for your money the way I'm tellin' ye."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WINGS OF RICHES.

AND then the blow fell, the greatest and farthest reaching in its effects within the memory of generations of Scottish people.

Dr. John came into the breakfast-room of the Manse one morning, a newspaper in his hand. Mina had come over to crack her egg and gossip with Bee and Bee's brother. There was a grey and old look on Dr. John's face, but he smiled under their gay rallies, and laid the paper gently aside, folding it accurately. But as soon as breakfast was over, he asked Bee to come to his study for a moment. Mina thought little about the matter. She played with Fluffy, the dark-furred, acquiescent Persian pussy, who dwelt in permanency in the sofa corner. As usual, Fluffy fluffed himself still more, retracted and pushed out his claws, looked at her out of his blue eye (the other was grey), and finally sneezed under her gentle fingers.

Then she heard the sound of smothered sobbing from the Doctor's study. Mina turned quickly

with that natural instinct of helping which had kept her close to Terry during the last terrible nights and days. To help meant to love with Mina.

With only the slightest pause of hesitation she opened the study door and went in. Dr. John was standing, white as paper, at the head of the sofa upon which Miss Bee had flung herself down, her face buried in the pillows. Neither of them noticed her entrance. Dr. John was speaking very slowly and gravely. Clearly he was holding himself in, for Mina could see the nervous grip of his fingers on the newspaper.

"Yes," he said, his left hand laid gently on her heaving shoulder, "I had put all your money into it, as well as all my own. There seemed nothing safer—a Bank of the highest reputation. They will take every stick out of the Manse. Even that will not pay the calls. We are ruined, Bee. Thank God, there is the stipend—I do not know whether they can take that or not. Surely, they must at least leave us enough to live on. But the child Mina—oh——!"

"What about Mina?" said Bee, looking up, sobered a little by another's trouble.

"Her little money is in the bank as well! She will be poorer than we, Bee. They cannot turn out a parish minister, you know. But she will not have a penny!"

"She must come and stay with us, John."

"Yes, Bee. Of course."

Mina, with a great gulp in her throat, managed to slip out unheard. They had many things to think of in that study. Yet chiefly it was of others they thought—Bee of her poor folk, dependants on their charity—the minister of certain aged relatives who had shared with him his too meagre stipend. He wished now he had applied earlier for an “augmentation,” like the others, his brethren of the Presbytery.

So they sat down, these two old people, brother and sister, comrades of many years, holding hands like children. Bee wept freely, and the Doctor put his arm about her, but said not a word, nor were his eyes moist.

Very quietly Mina slipped away and went to her own little cottage, through the gap in the privet hedge. Lummy Itherword met her at the door.

“Miss Mina,” she said as usual (though often warned to say “Mrs. Terry” or “please, ma’am,”) “that crazy Esson lad is i’ the parlour—and, faith, if ye ken how to shift him, it’s mair than I do!”

Hastily Mina brushed past, and there was Esson standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece, a bundle of papers in his hand. He could not keep something triumphant out of the smile with which he greeted her. With very good sense he said nothing about the escapade of the night before, nor yet concerning his capture by Lummy and her aunt.

"That will settle her," he said, handing over the letters without greeting—"the 'Green Girl' I mean. For the other—well, if I were you, I should go and see her myself."

"But," said Mina, "the woman has gone to Nice. *She* said so——"

Neither mentioned the Enemy by name. There was no need.

"Hunter Mayne had a letter from her this morning, asking him to send on some painting traps, colour-boxes, and so on to her address in London. As usual, he was pressed for time and asked Wells to do it. I saw the number and all over Wells' shoulder."

Mina fairly radiated disapprobation, and turned a pink, indignant ear.

"Oh," said Esson easily, "since I've taken to detecting, I never let a little thing like that stand in my way. But I might have saved myself the trouble. Look there!"

And he handed her a scrap of paper, which Hunter Mayne had hurriedly torn from the corner of a letter—

"137, FITZROY STREET,

"FITZROY SQUARE."

It was in a very different handwriting from the resurrected bundle of letters which Little Esson had laid upon the table. Mina stood gazing at it blankly.

"Turn it over," said Archie Esson, still smiling.

It contained a postscript conceived and executed

after the manner of women, with the initial "I" begun very small in the corner, and the rest of the message cramped and crushed together. Many authors take a similar pride in getting as many words as possible into the square inch.

This is what the postscript said, when finally deciphered—

"I have just been over to Paris, putting my boy Achille to the Lycée St. Louis. It is young for him to go, but my husband——"

The sentence was torn off at that point, and Mina, dazed with the many happenings of that morning, did not at once pick up the meaning.

"The letter cannot be from. . . the woman who claims to be Terry's wife," she said slowly. "See, she speaks of her husband—of her little boy."

Little Esson put an eager hand on Mina Fairweather's arm. He almost shook her.

"Don't you understand?" he cried. "Jeanne Danicheff was a singer—at concerts and things. Girls like that often keep their maiden names. Besides, it wasn't Jeanne Danicheff who said that Terry had been married before, it was Hilda Grainger. I think Hunter Mayne did some tall lying, too. And for that I will speak with him in the gate."

"But the letters?" stammered Mina, for a moment forgetting even the desolation she had left behind her at the Manse, in the new interest of the investigation.

Little Esson brought his hand down on the earth-stained heap of correspondence on the table. "They are not at all the same handwriting," he said, "it is quite easy to see where an attempt has been made to imitate, and where, after a while, the forger has dropped into a more natural hand. Come right up to London now, and see Jeanne Danicheff. I will meet you there, if you like, and we will go together to a lawyer. Do you know one?"

"Yes," said Mina slowly, "but I wouldn't like to go to him—if—if it should be true after all."

"Shame!" cried Esson hotly, forgetting to whom he spoke, "you didn't know old Terry. A man like Terry wouldn't do such a thing!"

"Some men would."

The words were forced from her. She was still thinking of Hunter Mayne. And it was true enough that till the final hours of his life she had never really known Terry Fairweather.

Then across her thought, and blotting all, drifted the news which had smitten the household at the Manse, and many thousands of others through all Scotland that day.

"Do you know," she cried suddenly, "that the Bank in which my money was invested has failed? I am a loser by all that Terry left me in his will."

To her surprise, instead of the amazed sorrow she had expected, Esson capered about the floor.

"Hurrah!" he cried, "then those wasps down at Broom Lodge won't get a cent either!"

THE WINGS OF RICHES.

"For shame, Archie," said Mina, in her turn "do you know that Dr. John has lost his savings and Miss Bee every penny she had. They are in great trouble. Besides, you should think of me."

"I am—I do!" cried Esson. "Oh, Myn, Myn, I can think of nothing else. I have lost my five pounds a year. I was in it, too. Old 'Pitch-a-Toss' will be sold up. But I can make a good income anywhere. I shall have to work now whether I like it or no. And if you only would oh, Myn, if I dared to ask you to!—I have not a farthing just now—but oh, if you only knew how welcome you would be to share it. I wish I could tell you. But you know, Myn—we always have known——"

Mina Fairweather took him gently by the arm.

"Archie," she said steadily, "this is not good for you—not nice. We have work to do"—then she softened it—"you and I together, a big work. We must first of all clear Terry's memory. We must not think of ourselves."

"Oh, Myn—if you could!"

"Go away, Archie," she said, gently opening the door, as if to be rid of his pleading; "there is more to be said—at least, not now."

Was she afraid? Of Little Esson, not at all. Of herself—perhaps.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KNIGHT ERRANT.

TERRY'S girl-widow found that there was indeed much to be done. She went to London and saw Jeanne Danicheff in a bare studio near Fitzroy Square. A screen stood across the corner of the big, uncarpeted room. Then came a table with tubes and brushes, one or two chairs, a crazy staging for posing figures, two easels, a battered grand piano covered with cigarette ash-trays, while a grimy array of frames and canvasses leaned at various angles against the wall. Jeanne Danicheff opened the door herself. She wore a paint-stained white blouse over her tight-fitting blue dress. A palette was poised on her left thumb, and she stared almost good-humouredly at her visitor. Mina went in with a little bow and smile, like a visitor come on business of art patronage. The lobby was two steps only, uncarpeted also. Canaries flew freely about the big paint-smelling room, a stick of incense fumed before an ugly Chinese figure squatting like a drunken Buddha on the top of the round German stove.

High on a ladder stood a young man, hammer in

hand, his mouth full of tin-tacks. He was busily nailing up scraps of gauze-netting over the window tops.

"To keep the birds from getting away when we have the windows open," Jeanne explained with a foreign accent pleasant to Mina's ear.

"Finish quickly, and come down, Casimir," she added to the young man with the long, rippling hair, perched on the dizziness of the ladder.

"My husband," she said quietly, when the young man called Casimir stood at last upon the uncarpeted boards, smiling a little uncertainly. You see, they did not yet know whether Mina was a creditor or only a possible client. All sorts of people come to dun poor artists nowadays. Nor did they much care, these happy-go-lucky young people. So they just stood smiling and waiting for Mina to explain her errand to 137, Fitzroy Street, Fitzroy Square.

"I am Terry Fairweather's widow." She got it out at last, though with considerable effort.

Husband and wife looked at each other uncertainly.

"I think—I think," faltered Mina, blushing deeply, "that you met my husband before he and I were married—in Egypt?"

"Did we?"

Wife looked frankly and clearly at husband. Husband, unwilling to give pain by forgetfulness, interrupted, "Yes, Jeanne, of course we did! Don't you remember, Jeanne?"

But neither of them did. And presently they all three laughed at that. But a light dawned on Jeanne Danicheff. She clapped her hands, and then, her eyes falling on the quietude of Mina's mourning, she said softly, "He was the pale young man with Mr. Mayne, wasn't he?—who painted a little and read poetry so beautifully. You remember, Casimir? I liked him best."

"Yes," said the painter; "it was at Cairo, at the Hotel Khedive."

"And we went to Assuan, we three, when you were finishing your stupid portraits of military people. Hunter Mayne took us to see the newly discovered tombs, and we had lunch there. Oh, how it all comes back!"

"Of course you would remember that, Jeanne!" smiled Casimir.

"Hush!" she said hastily to her husband. Then in Polish, "Do you not see she is in mourning? He is surely dead; the tall, pale young man who read poetry to me!"

She turned to Mina, and had her arms about her before the girl could escape. It is well Jeanne Danicheff was so quick, for Mina could not help showing her dislike to the embrace. But the swift, warm impulsiveness of the gesture was too much for even her Scottish reserve.

"And he married you—your . . . Terry, was it not? And then a little while you were happy . . . when . . . he died?"

She drew the young widow towards her, and

the tears were chasing each other, but not over Mina's cheeks.

"Have you——?" she began, and then stopped. Mina knew what she was going to ask, and with a certain curious shudder hastily answered, "No," in order to stop the question.

"So sad—so sad!" crooned Jeanne Danicheff, in her throaty dove's voice; "and I have two boys, both of them at school in France. You see, we have been married fifteen years, Casimir and I."

"But you look like a girl."

"I was not sixteen when I married. He took me away from my grandmother's, in Nice. She was unkind to me. And, as you see, we have always stayed the same to each other—boy and girl lovers—as we were the night when Casimir helped me through the balcony window, with the sea beneath, saying, 'Hush—hush' all the time. Perhaps that helps to keep people young—to love like that—one another, I mean."

Jeanne Danicheff stretched out her hand. The loose *peignoir* left the arm bare to the elbow. Reverently Casimir took it, and set his lips to the pretty, gracious curve above the wrist. A mere islander would have been ashamed of love-making "afore folk," but the artist did it naturally and gallantly—a part of the good manners native to his blood.

All was so simple and straightforward between Casimir and Jeanne that Mina went away reassured, not a question asked, her packet of forged

letters unopened in her little leathern satchel. As Esson said, it was assuredly the "Green Girl." Of that there was now no doubt. Well—wait!

And for the first time in her life Mina, the forgiving, actually plotted vengeance. She could not—she would not if she could—forgive Hilda Grainger, not even though the Lord's Prayer plainly bade her to—at least, not yet. She would give up saying it first.

And there—oh, marvel—was Archie Esson at the end of Fitzroy Street. He did not see her at first. He was smoking a cigarette, which he did not often do in "Pitch-and-Toss." He threw it away as soon as he caught sight of Mina. He, too, was growing wondrous polite these last days.

"Hallo—I mean, I beg your pardon, Mina," he began. "I have got a picture into their old Royal Academy show, and I came up to see it wasn't too badly skied. I knew you'd be along here—had jotted down the address in my 'Painters' Yearbook,' you know. And they say I'm not practical. He's a Pole, that fellow, but can't live at home—been up to tricks with the Government, I expect. 'By order of the Tzar,' and so forth! Exhibits in Paris mostly, sometimes in Spain and in Rome. Sketches well, but goes too strong on the purple-madder in his big pictures for my taste. Foreigners mostly do, barring the French and Dutch."

Esson reeled this off as fast as possible, so that Mina might not interrupt or ask awkward questions as to how he came there, following her in the teeth

of her commands absolute to remain at "Pitch-and-Toss." Little Esson felt this necessity himself, and proceeded to justify himself.

"I'm as poor as Job's turkey, that's the truth," he stammered, smiling his winsome, confident smile at Mina, and rubbing his fingers through the tight scalp-curls which gave him, though a man in years, that invincible air of a "Truant Boy." "Fact, Mina! I came here to get a good start of the sheriff's officer. I *must* sell a picture, and picture-dealers are all brute beasts. If a fellow was to believe them, not one of them ever sold a picture in his life!"

"And that cigarette you were smoking when I saw you first?" suggested Mina suspiciously; "was that 'Caporal' or twopenny twist? It didn't smell like it?"

She sniffed his cuff before taking his arm in these deserted streets.

"You've got some more! Hand them over," she commanded austere; "you know you never work when you smoke. You only lie down and pretend to be getting ideas. Really, you are just playing off! Come, now, all you have got."

Very ruefully Little Esson searched this pocket and that. "No, they were not there, nor there—nor—ah!"

Mina indicated a breast pocket which bulged obviously with something square and accurately cornered. With a grimace, Esson passed over the cigarettes, which, after one good look, Mina snapped viciously into her small hand-satchel,

along with the letters of the ' Green Girl's ' forging.

" These are Egyptians, the best sort," she said.

" What do you mean by it—you a ruined man, groaning about the sheriff's officer ? "

But she smiled a little. There was an ancient understanding now growing into a new sympathy between them. Besides, nobody, man or woman (but especially woman), could long be angry with Little Esson.

" It's like this, Myn," he exclaimed (he only called her " Myn " when very sure of his favour), " when I've lots of money, I smoke bird's-eye like everybody else ; but when I have only half a crown, you know, why, I just go and spend it all at once on a box of good Egyptians. Then a fellow knows how he stands. He has got to scratch for his next meal."

" Then you have no money ? "

" Not a penny ! "

Mina's hand made an involuntary movement towards her satchel, but it stopped midway. Mina was thinking. There was certainly something very attractive about Little Esson. Her own secret wealth—his open, shameless Bohemian poverty ! Somehow the two things seemed to draw together. Mina could not explain it to herself, and the chronicler will not try. He only records the fact, and that as briefly as possible. The consequences of this attraction take more time even for the readiest writer. At last, after glancing sideways at Little Esson's rueful face for a while, Mina stopped dead in front of him in

a quiet street near Soho, with the blank wall of a bottling establishment on one side (pickles and preserves world-famous), and ranges of silent warehouses on the other as far as the eye could reach.

"And you dare ask me to marry you!" she said, burning her boats.

"Of course I do," said Little Esson undauntedly. "I only wish it had been years ago."

"Then why didn't you?" exclaimed Mina; "you had the chance, like the others. Even Terry took some time! More shame to you all."

At which Little Esson went first red and then pale. He held his straw hat in one hand and rubbed his curls vehemently with the other. But this time he had something to say—only for once, he did not know how to say it. At last, the *finesse* deserting him, he blurted out, "I did not want to take you like that."

The girl threw back her head as if struck—an old, sad gesture, sole relic of very evil days when Claude Hilliard entered alone and found his daughter waiting, without a supper on the table or a penny to pay for it.

It seemed to Mina as if even her own familiar Esson had turned against her.

"You thought I did a thing unwomanly, unmaidenly, that night in the studio—after—after—my father had beaten me!"

"No," said Little Esson slowly, and picking his words, "I knew something more. It was not because of your father you did it. If it had only

been that, you would have gone back as you had done before——”

“Then—what—tell me what? Quick!”

Mina’s face was white and terrible. But Little Esson remained calm and grave. His time to lose or gain had come. He knew it—none better.

“Mina,” he said very gently, “I loved you then and always—better far than any of them. But I was in the town-meadow that morning—where Hunter Mayne was painting. I saw, I heard. You thought then that you loved him. I knew *he* could not truly love any woman. I knew him as only a man can know a man—know and be silent, the more’s the pity! I knew he would not speak that night—in the dusk, when you broke in upon us. But—I loved you too much to take you that way. God knows, I would not take you *now* unless you loved me. And I love you so much more, that I think I had not begun to love you at all then!”

“I do *not* love you—I never shall love you!” cried Mina, indignantly, fierce, hurting tears starting to her eyes. “Go—go—out of my sight, Archie Esson! I never want to see you again. My Terry was worth all of you put together—yes, ten thousand times over!”

“Ay, that is true,” said Little Esson, quietly. And without another word he put on his old straw hat and went his penniless way—even so, doing his lady’s will, like any knight of old, because it was her will. * * *

And then, as usual, the lady began to be sorry.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNDERHAND DEALINGS.

MINA returned very thoughtfully along the half-deserted, wind-swept streets which lead towards Regent Circus from Fitzroy Square. Her first idea was to go directly to the exhibition and there buy the picture which Little Esson was showing—"The Bloom of Their Youth," two young lovers plucking hawthorn blossom together in the depths of a flowery glade—his very latest masterpiece, according to "Pitch-and-Toss." But just as Mina was turning southward in the direction of Burlington House, the thought came to her that she would be almost certain to encounter there Little Esson himself, and perhaps Hunter Mayne.

Turning sharply eastward, she entered instead the galleries of a great firm of picture-dealers near the corner of Pall Mall. Messrs. Huth and Bernstein were at her service, in the person of a very small, very emphatic young man, with an infinity of bows and airy manners.

On hearing her errand, he referred to a catalogue of the Royal Academy of the Arts, and then to a note-book at his side.

"The price of Mr. Archibald Esson's picture, 'The Bloom of Their Youth,' is £200," he said; "but, as Mr. Esson is a young man, and, though full of promise, is not yet very well known in London, I daresay that we could obtain the picture from him before the end of the exhibition for quite half that sum!"

Mina allowed an impatient gesture to escape her.

"I do not want it for less," she said; "and I want him to have the money now—in cash!"

The bright, emphatic young man stared blankly at her. Then he recalled himself.

"Oh," he said, speaking now with a certain hushed, confidential air, as if between them they harboured a guilty secret—"well, we can arrange that also, I do not doubt. But, do you know, you are also increasing our commission—a very modest one, of course. And then you must remember that you will not get possession of the picture till the close of the Royal Academy Exhibition."

"Oh, I don't care about that," cried Mina, with cheeks growing hot under her eyes. "I want you to see that Mr. Esson gets the money at once. I am Mrs. Terry Fairweather, and will draw you a cheque on the Credit Lyonnais—it is not far——"

"Oh, just next door, so to speak. We do our own business there. Many foreign customers, you know."

"Oh, and will you see that the picture is safely taken out? And will you keep it for me? You have a number of pictures stored for my late husband——?"

The bowing young man elevated his eyebrows.

"What name did you say?" he asked mechanically.

"Mr. Terence Fairweather," faltered Mina, and she glanced at her dress.

"I beg your pardon. Yes, so we have."

But clearly he remembered nothing about it.

A bald, smooth-browed, shiny gentleman, graver and more formal, approached from behind a kind of partition and bowed profoundly, almost orientally.

"Certainly," he said. "The matter is not *quite* in Mr. Nelson's department, but we do have a good many stored in that name—mostly by the younger Scotch School. I think—may be valuable some day. They are coming on, these young men. I presume that you would like us to place this one with the others."

The emphatic, bowing youth had withdrawn a little way, and the bald-headed gentleman continued in his place. He really had gained his information from looking up a ledger while the junior was holding Mina in conversation.

"Is there anything else we can do for you, Mrs. Fairweather? We shall be only too pleased. You, no doubt, desire that your name should not appear—just as your husband was in the habit of doing?"

Mina opened her eyes. What a wonderful memory and grasp of detail! Behind the ground glass and mahogany of the screen, the big ledger was still open at the letter "F," where there was a footnote to that effect.

"Yes," said Mina, looking at him with quiet determination. "If you see at the various Scottish or local exhibitions any other pictures by Mr. Esson—no matter what—will you please buy them at the price asked. Also"—she hesitated—"I will write on a sheet of paper the names of a few other artists from whom I wish you to buy one each of their best works—whether the picture has been exhibited or not."

The bald-headed gentleman bowed stoically. This was either madness, or—a very far-discerning and critical woman. At any rate, he would see the pictures.

And she wrote down various names and addresses, all ending with the words "Creelpport-on-Dee, N.B."

"Madame is making a speciality?" smiled the shiny-fronted gentleman.

"I am keeping up one of my late husband's," said Mina.

"Ah, yes, of course," he said, "and to what price would you wish us to go? You see, artists, especially if still little known, and, as one might say 'caviare to the general,' are a little apt to ask—ah—rather esoteric prices."

"One hundred pounds each," said Mina; "and my lawyers, Messrs. Stark, MacNoah, and Stark, of Lincoln's Inn, will instruct my bank to hold the necessary funds at your disposal."

The grave gentleman's forehead shone still more, and it was in a semi-paternal way that he answered. "Oh, that is not at all necessary.

We have had the honour of executing many commissions for your husband, and we require no other guarantee."

"It is necessary for *me*!" Mina was imperious, as she had learned to be when travelling with Terry. "You will be good enough to follow my instructions."

Upon which both gentlemen bowed her to the door.

"Seems to have lots of money?" queried the youngster, beginning to turn over and arrange prints in immense portfolios.

"Her husband was very rich—queer taste in art, though," said the shiny gentleman indifferently.

"At first I thought she must be sweet on some good-looking young painter fellow. But a whole school of them, and Scotch at that! However, she may be right; there may be money in it. But it's betting on the off-chance. All picture dealing is gambling, Mr. Nelson, and being gamblers, you and I had better confine ourselves to a safe conservative business in the younger associates of the Royal Academy who are sure to become Academicians!"

And he snapped the door of his mahogany-and-coloured-glass cage.

* * * * *

Mina was full of business that day. She looked in next at a Messenger Call Office, and sent a boy up to Euston Station to take a berth on the Drumfern night express, from which town the

little local train with the Galloway mail-bags would carry her to Creelport-on-Dee by six in the morning. She would call for the cheque on her return from her lawyers.

Messrs. Stark, MacNoah, and Stark was the name and style of as Scottish a legal firm as ever practised in England. The name of the second partner, though strange to the southern ear, was genuine old "Creelport." There was a corresponding firm in Edinburgh—MacNoah, Stark, and Stark. And between Hill Street, Edinburgh, and Lincoln's Inn, W.C., a vast deal of international business was done.

It was Mr. Stark, Mr. John Stark, senior partner, to whom Mina always addressed herself. Clever young Mr. MacNoah was at the time in Scotland, forwarding the rush of business which the great bank failure had caused.

A handsome old gentleman came forward and shook hands with the widow of his old client, bowing over her glove with quite a courtly grace. Deference to her mourning was somehow subtly expressed in the action. Mina felt it, and thanked the beautiful old gentleman in her heart. The limbs of the law-tree often produce much fully-ripe, generous, and savoury fruitage.

"I congratulate you, Mrs. Fairweather," he said, "and myself a little, too, in your interest. For some time I had been hearing rumours about the bank which has failed. So I kept your English investments, as left you by your husband,

here by me on good interest, for short periods. And every penny is at hand when you wish it. But—I suppose that Paris—what shall we say?—is amply sufficient for all your wants. That act of gift during Mr. Fairweather's lifetime, though I disapproved at the time, has certainly saved you a great deal of trouble, and, after all, your money is as safe in the French *Rentes* as anywhere."

"On what, then, do you congratulate me, Mr. Stark?"

"On your absence from this little compilation," he said smilingly. "He handed Mina a 'Scotsman,' containing a complete list of all those holding stock in the bank at the time of its failure.

Mina took it with a hand that shook. Her name was indeed absent. But those of both Dr. John and Miss Bee were printed in the fatal columns. Her heart was beating, and the letters swam before her eyes. She could not find that of Archibald Esson. Perhaps his holding was too small to be put down in the first list.

"Yes, it is indeed fortunate for you, Mrs. Fairweather," the lawyer resumed, "as we might not have been clear as to whether your French *Rentes*, though purchased and held in that country, might not have been liable to calls. But I regret to say that your relative, Lady Grainger, against our advice, maintained her share of Mr. Fairweather's legacy in this bank. She will, therefore, do well to get herself adjudged bankrupt as soon as possible."

But Mina had more important matters on hand than to think about Lady Grainger.

"You must help me," she said; "you promised you would, Mr. Stark. My dearest friends in the world are ruined, and we must lift their burden somehow. Do you object to a—well"—here she smiled—"a manipulation of the truth—oh, for *so* good an end?"

"I am a lawyer, my dear," said the old man; "it is my business to arrange things—all manner of things, the truth sometimes included. Come, what is it? I will go as far as I can for your sake, without actually endangering the printing of my name on next year's Law List."

"Oh, it is nothing like that," said Mina, with a dawning hope. "The dearest, best, sweetest people in the world are the parish minister of Creelport, Dr. John Broadbent, and his sister Miss Beatrice. They are involved. Oh, Mr. Stark, please——"

The lawyer's hand moved instinctively to a little notebook, wherein a second list with written comments had been pasted. His head nodded two or three times, and he sighed.

"Pretty deeply, too," he said; "more's the pity. Clients of our allied firm at Edinburgh, I believe. The money for the bank shares lay quite a while in our hands—I mean, in *their* hands, before Dr. Broadbent could make up his mind. It is most unfortunate. In fact, I think the stock certificates are here. Mr. MacNoah

forgot to take them up with him. The vendor was Welsh, you see."

Mr. Stark whistled down a tube, and mumbled something unintelligible to Mina, all except the final words, "City of Glasgow—Jones of the first part—sells to Broadbent." Then he looked up from his desk.

"A happy man 'John Jones of the first part' must be to-day," said Mr. Stark.

A clerk opened the door and handed the lawyer a bundle of papers.

He sighed as he turned them over in his hand.

"Many a goodman's death-warrant will be untied and re-tied in just such parcels to-day," he said.

To his surprise, Mina made a couple of rapid strides and snatched the deeds from him.

"Highway robbery and police!" cried Mr. Stark, laughing. "That is a bundle which not many people would be eager to own to-day."

"You must arrange for me to have it," she panted in her haste; "or, at least, write and make the Doctor and Miss Bee believe that they are saved. You must find an informality. They are to be out of it. It will kill them."

The lawyer shook his head.

"Our Mr. MacNoah makes tight work," he said. "The very 'Fifteen' themselves could not find a flaw. You are not thinking of paying the 'calls' for your friends, are you? I was not informed of the amount of the gift which our dear Terry made you, and for business reasons I

do not desire to be so. But still, to replace the value of these shares, and to meet all the liquidator's 'calls' without bankruptcy will take a considerable slice even of your fortune."

"I know—I don't care!" cried Mina. "It is what Terry would have wished. It must be done. And you will do it for me."

She went and laid her hand on the old gentleman's arm as a daughter might have done.

He looked up at her wet eyes and smiled.

"Well, if I must tell lies—I must," he said. "Anything to oblige a lady. And such a lady!" He pressed her hand a little. Even old gentlemen learned in the law have their soft sides.

"I think we can manage to tell the truth without telling Dr. Broadbent and his sister the *whole* truth! We are pretty likely to know the liquidator, and as the certificates are in our possession, it will be all the same to him if he gets his money; whether from Dr. Broadbent or another, will not matter."

He stood looking at her steadfastly for a while, and then, putting his hand on her shoulder, he said, "I am an old fellow and a bachelor—ah, I only wish I had been forty years or so younger."

Mina looked up at him, and for the first time in his professional life, Mr. John Stark kissed a client in his own office in plain business hours.

"I believe that is bribery and corruption," he said, as he opened the door for Mina, "but I thank you, all the same!"



"While Mina was thus forcing the pace in London."
Little Esson. [Page 235.]



CHAPTER XX.

THE REAPER—MR. CALVINUS MCCRON.

WHILE Mina was thus forcing the pace in London, quite other things were happening to Little Esson. He had not a penny in his pocket—not that that troubled him. It was Mina—Mina had dismissed him—Mina had been angry because—well, because of what he had told her.

Yet he had only said that he loved her—that he had always loved her? Was he sorry for blurting it out like that? A fool—very likely! But sorry, no! Very much several times no, indeed! Within him his heart rejoiced, insurgent, rollicking, almost insolent in its joy!

Still, she had sent him off. He would have to work—and work he would! Yes, such pictures as had never come from brush! By Jove, he saw them already—in his mind's eye. Pale, delicate, little romances—daybreak, a girl at the pasture bars and the cows coming up out of the dewy hollows! Oh, and ever so many others! And the feeling of what he was going to put into these pictures nearly made Little Esson weep. It was like the author-men with their books . . . before they are written.

Presently he found himself going up the steps at Burlington House. He had an exhibitor's ticket in his overcoat pocket, a stout bunch of keys, but nothing either slim or stout to open with them, save and except "Pitch-and-Toss," and that was far away. Naturally he had lost the return half of his third-class ticket. He had a purse, but not a single coin therein. Glove—but its fellow also, retired into the *Ewigkeit*! A pencil and a sketch book in a side pocket were his all—not even a cigarette. Mina had taken them. And he was glad of that. It seemed a kind of link between them. She would not have done *that*—unless—unless—but no, she did—she must! And Little Esson skipped across the solemn hall of entrance, where they take the umbrellas of the public as if they were saying a benediction over each one. And then the policeman, a burly man, well versed in art and artists, wondered what was the matter with him. He must be a critic of the Whistler School, he thought, and it crossed his mind that he might have to run him first "out" and then "in."

But it was only when Little Esson came to the end of his inventory and his meditation upon Mina, that the fit took him.

"Yes—no—yes—oh, hang it, impossible! And yet——!" And then he began to think it all over again.

After a while Little Esson skipped up to look at his own picture. Some active telephoning

had been done by the agent of Messrs. Huth and Bernstein. So just when Little Esson stood in front of the last masterpiece of old "Pitch-and-Toss," a functionary was attaching the invaluable little ticket to the frame which indicates to the world that such and such a work is no longer for public sale.

If it had not been for a imminent lady's hat, as wide in diameter as a cart-wheel, Little Esson would have turned a somersault!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he remarked aloud, so forcibly that the lady with the circumferential headgear shut up her notebook and moved away in a kind of fright, fearing perhaps lest she might be "jiggered" too. There had been several outrages in the penknife-slicing way at various salons and exhibitions (chiefly French), and she mistook Little Esson in his excited state for a second Jack the Ripper!

But really Esson was looking for somebody to share his joy with, and to advise him as to whether he could not get an instalment of the price out of the secretary to pay for some dinner and—cigarettes.

As is the rule on such occasions at the Royal Academy, he sought and he found—immediately running across a certain ex-Creelport man, one Calvinus McCron, who was just such another feather-pate as himself, but who covered his madness with the method of an immobile countenance. He was not so good a painter—at least so Creelport avowed—and the misunderstood Calvinus got himself elected to one of the smaller water-colour societies, and settled in London.

“ McCron — McCron—oh, Mac — she’s sold ! She’s sold ! ” gasped Little Esson.

“ Who’s sold ? ” articulated McCron, a tall, lanky, solemn-faced man whose humour was of the dry brand which the French call *pince-sans-rire*.

“ Why, my picture, of course—‘ The Bloom of Their Youth ’ ! ”

“ Nonsense ! ”

“ I tell you it’s true—I wouldn’t joke about a thing like that ! I saw the Johnny putting on the ticket ! ”

“ He must have mistaken it for some other fellow’s picture,” said McCron soothingly. “ Never mind, Esson, such things *will* happen ! You’ll get over it.”

“ Don’t rot ! I saw the number on his book all right—it’s my picture—*my* picture—sure enough ! ”

“ Then it’s the Chantry Bequest,” said McCron, “ *that’s* a charity ! ”

By this time they had reached “ The Bloom of Their Youth,” and there was quite a little gathering of the knowing ones, who look at “ Sold ” tickets, perhaps trying to make up their minds as to what could have induced any sane person to besuch a fool.

“ Sure ! ” said Calvinus McCron, “ you’re in luck, young ’un ! What did you ask for her ? ”

“ Two hundred,” hesitated Little Esson ; “ but it can never be anything like that ! ”

Calvinus McCron fell back and regarded Little Esson with transpontine evidences of admiration.

“ We-l-l-l,” he said very slowly, “ I admire you, I do. You’ve the finest cheek for your size I have seen this side of the junction of Time

and Eternity ! ” Then sadly, as he patted Little Esson’s face, “ I shall not look upon its like again ! Never—ah—never ! ”

“ Stop being an ass,” said Little Esson. “ I’m stony—come and let’s see if we can raise anything on this at the office.”

“ Oh, no, you can’t,” said Calvinus McCron, thrusting his long bony hands deep into the skirts of his dust-sheet-like overcoat ; “ they always give the buyer of a thing like that time to flee the country, same as for other unnatural crimes.”

“ If you don’t stop playing the giddy,” said Little Esson, “ I’ll go and speak to the policeman about you. You ought to be removed ! ”

And he made as if to do so, but only asked the way to the secretary’s office. The secretary was out. Yes, number 379 was sold. The clerk in charge did not know anything more about it—had no instructions. Come back to-morrow at 10.30—that is, if you are not a member of the Academy, in which case the secretary will be glad to see you at his private house.

“ I wouldn’t be a member, not if they went on their blooming knees and asked me,” said Little Esson.

“ They won’t, I scarcely suppose,” said McCron gravely.

“ For some of them are out of breath,
And all of them are fat.”

He quoted with the natural irreverence of artistic youth towards its elders and betters.

“ I don’t want honours,” groaned Little Esson,

"I want five quid of an advance on that fine work of Art—never so fine to my eyes as with that brave ticket."

* * * * *

"And now, what are the rules of the game?" said McCron, as they came out.

"I'm going to sponge on you till to-morrow, that's all," said Little Esson, with determination, "you've got a place here, haven't you—a studio specially built, and all that?"

McCron sank his hands in his dust-coat pockets. His chin drooped on his breast.

"It's not much of a place," he said slowly, "but I think I can find it. I've got the key somewhere, but I don't know the address very well—at least, the number is marked on the tail of my shirt. But the bedroom is just proper—oh, a ripping bed—no shakedown like what you fellows pig in at 'Pitch-and-Toss.' It has a regular woven-wire patent mattress and all the accessories. Come along! Hoop!"

They "hooped," but the nearer they got to the neighbourhood of the studio, the less certain became Calvinus McCron of finding his abode.

"You see," he said, "it's like this—I'm generally off in the country—doing portraits——"

"Oh!" cried Little Esson, to whom this was the Sin of Sins, "has it come to this? I won't sleep with you. I won't partake of your hospitality—I thought there was some fearful secret behind all this debasing talk of wire

mattresses. I'd starve before *I* would paint a portrait ! ”

“ You can't—that's it,” said Calvinus ; “ and to be honest, I didn't know I could till I tried. It is a down-come, of course, from New-Schoolism, Revolutionising Art, and so forth. But it's easier—and pays better. Also a good deal can be done with a suitable second-hand enlarging camera *and* the sittee's favourite photograph ! ”

“ Really, Calvinus McCron,” said Esson, “ you are a most degraded animal. I always knew, of course, what London did to a man's talent if he went and plowtered there. But you are become as the beasts that perish. I believe soon you will be going out to afternoon teas—perhaps reciting ! ”

“ It's not that that's worrying me,” said Calvinus, looking about him distressedly, “ it's that blessed studio which has been and hooked it ! I'm sure it was in this street.”

He looked along the various doors and peered into the areas of a dingy street in Camden Town, till the policeman on duty told him that he had better be off. He was well known, it seemed, to members of the force.

“ Then,” said McCron, “ if I am such a public monument, will you be good enough to tell me where I live—for I'm blessed if I know ! ”

The policeman contented himself with the remark that he had had enough of Calvinus, and that he had warned him. That was all !

"And we pay taxes to keep up the like of that!" said McCron, scornfully regarding X 987's retreating back and practical looking arms, which were swinging as steadily as ever they had done on the Essex cornfields, where first he had learned to sow the springtime seed.

"How about the agent you took the shop from?" suggested Little Esson, who was getting somewhat tired. He had had a variety of excitations that day, but the partaking of food had not been among them.

"Good—you are a genius, after all!" cried McCron; "if I were a Frenchman I would embrace you on both cheeks and weep on your bosom——!"

"Don't! I'm armed!" said Little Esson, looking round. "And if you monkey any longer we'll get locked up, which will solve the difficulty in one way. Only there'd be police-court in the morning."

However, they found the agent, who seemed, not without cause, to regard McCron as a dangerous lunatic, and Little Esson as a quite insufficient keeper.

But as the rent was paid and there were no complaints, he told McCron the number of his residence, trying all the time to get near enough to smell his breath, to make out what he had been drinking. So at least Little Esson affirmed. The agent, a little trembly man, who pulled constantly at a ragged grey beard, kept getting up to let them

out. He was panting to be rid of them. Mac invited him to be seated once more in his own chair.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?" he said. He could not say less. A tenant who paid his rent and never asked for repairs was worth having in these times and in Camden Town.

"Yes; have you got a pipe-cleaner?" Calvinus demanded as calmly as "how d'ye do?"

"I am not a smoker, sir," said the little nervous man, visibly embarrassed.

"Then let me have a knitting needle!" commanded McCron, a little more impatiently.

"But I am not a married man," said the house-agent, beginning to tremble for his life.

"And you call yourself a house-agent, you take a commission, and have no knitting needle, a little thing like that! Give me a tooth-pick, a one-pronged fork, a file without a handle, a bit of wire—anything, man. *Only be quick!*"

His voice rose into a scream, as he blew fiercely into the hole of his key-stem. "It's full, I tell you, and I can't get access into my own domicile, leased to me by you. I demand explanations. I'll have a legal action or something to clear out this con—founded thing!"

"I will give you a spare key with pleasure," said the agent, "and have this one attended to."

McCron smacked him on the back.

"Prince of House-agents," he cried, "never will I seek another than yourself! I will live and die under your roofs. I will prefer the

devil I know to the devil I don't know. In spite of all temptations to belong to——”

“Come away, Mac,” said Little Esson, “we have already taken up too much of this gentleman's time. Besides, I'm hungry!”

But McCron, taken with that mysterious access of smileless idiocy which made him at times invaluable and at others unbearable, insisted on shaking his new-found friend by the hand.

“I will paint your portrait—*for nothing*,” he added, after a sufficient pause to allow the agent to make an offer. “It will be an heirloom for many generations.”

“Thank you,” said the unfortunate house-agent, tugging at almost the last handful of his beard and agitating the door of his office, “but I am leaving the city. I think of emigrating. I have a son in Australia—or New Zealand——”

“But I thought you said that you were not married?” queried McCron.

“Oh, well,” cried the man desperately, “at any rate, that is a detail. I'm selling my business. To-morrow! To-night! You can paint my successor's picture. I will throw that in along with the goodwill, without extra charge!”

And the door went slam in their faces. They heard it locked and double-locked. Bars were shot, and a little ticket appeared mysteriously in a slot—

OUT

CHAPTER XXI,

MORE CALVINUS.

"WHY do you take all that trouble to make a donkey of yourself?" demanded Little Esson of his friend Calvinus McCron, not a muscle of whose grave, almost saturnine, countenance had twitched during this interview.

"Life has but few pleasures," said Calvinus sententiously, "let us take the winged hours as they fly!"

And he waved his hand appropriately.

"By Jove," he added, slapping his pockets, "I have forgotten that address again!" Luckily, however, Little Esson had not. It was a sort of small double apartment, with a studio built on to the north. There was a hole called a kitchen, in which was a gas-stove for cooking, the *débris* of ancient photographing and enlarging operations, a bedroom—and the studio. Calvinus did the honours majestically. The kitchen, it appeared, had not its equal in Camden Town. You could cook a Lord Mayor's banquet on it. You could "do" anything, from

a bloater to bacon and eggs, which range was not quite so great.

"Got a match?"

Little Esson had. It was about his all. Mina had spared these when she took the cigarettes.

"Ah, that's good!" said Calvinus, "she burns! Sometimes, if that collector rook has been round too often when I'm not here, they have her cut off from supplies. But to-night we shall live like princes. What do you think of the bedroom?"

Little Esson replied that it was very nice, but would be the better of a bed!

Calvinus McCron stood dumb-stricken, his mouth agape.

"No bed!" he exclaimed; and again, "No bed!" He looked under the washstand for it, as if it had got concealed by chance in the soap dish.

"No bed!" he cried, scratching his head violently, and then taking three long sudden strides to the window, he looked eagerly into the scurry of the street, as if he expected to see his couch returning from a quiet evening stroll.

"It was an A 1 bed!" he murmured meditatively; "steel springs, good hair matt——"

"You idiot!" cried Little Esson, aroused to sudden transports of indignation, "what have you done with your bed—*my* bed—all I have to sleep on to-night? Is it for this you have wiled

me here ? Villain ! Traitor ! Slave ! Portrait painter ! ”

Calvinus McCron scratched the other side of his head. Nothing seemed to occur to him from the new stimulation.

“ Look here,” shouted Little Esson, “ did you ‘ pop ’ it ? If so, where’s the ticket, and have you got enough to get it out ? ”

“ No—I think—not ! ” said Calvinus slowly.

But he was not sure. Such things occurred in all artistic households, well or ill regulated. London is the final Bohemia. So at last that country has a sea coast.*

“ Think again ! ” cried Esson, “ cough it up—where have you put that bed ? Sold it ? ”—A shake of the head—“ Dreamt that you had it——? ”

Calvinus McCron silently pointed to the scars its legs had made on the carpetless floor.

“ It was on castors,” he said sadly, “ brass castors.”

“ Did you burn it for firewood last winter ? Have you eaten it, or lent it to somebody ? ”

The gaunt portrait painter threw up his arms.

“ Embrace me ! ” he cried, as Esson hurriedly withdrew to look for a weapon of defence. “ You have hit it. I lent it to Murdo Burns before I

* (“ The Prophecies of Shakespeare,” by Surgeon-General Salveson, C.I.E., of Thorsby Manor, Thorsby. Published at the Author’s own expense, Thorsby, 1900.)

went north last autumn. We'll go to his studio at once and get it back."

Which, first shutting and locking the door, they proceeded forthwith to do. Esson took charge of the street, number, and key.

"Hungry?" demanded Mac suddenly.

"Rather!" said Esson, with a wan smile.

"No time to waste; get a slice of sausage cold at the corner pub, a drink, and two hunks of bread. We can eat it as we go along. Better get there before Murdo goes to bed, or he won't get up to give it us—no, not though we were to hammer on his door till Doomsday. He sleeps like a Creelport fisherman on Sunday morning."

* * * *

"It's down here!" said the lank Calvinus, suddenly indicating with a jerk of the arm a narrow entrance between two brick walls. He trod the intricate way without the least hesitation, till Little Esson regarded him with astonishment.

"How is it that you know the way to Murdo Burns's studio so much better than to your own?"

"Instinct," said Calvinus, whispering mysteriously, his hand edgewise to his mouth, "it's a noble thing is instinct—the swallows in their yearly pilgrimages, the cuckoo when it cooks, and—*hsssh*, *Burns's father is a distiller!*"

"You're too loony even for a portrait painter; you'll fail!"

"Oh, I do," said Calvinus, with a pensive melancholy. "They never urge me to call again! But here we are. Ho, Murdo, ho, my merry men all—what's in the 'grey-beard'? And, I say, I want my bed!"

The abode of Murdo Burns (son of the celebrated distiller of that name, and no relative of the poet sometimes referred to about the 19th of January) was in a sort of brick pavilion, which bore a remarkable likeness to disused and much adapted stables. It stood a little way off the Harrow Road, and was a lonesome enough place at the best of times, but especially now, when the shades of night were already at their accustomed task, while Calvinus and Little Esson waited without. They waited in vain.

They rapped, they thumped, they kicked. There was silence within and silence without. A cur yapped somewhere in the neighbouring gardens, but feebly and without ambition.

"I don't believe he is here at all!" cried Esson fiercely. "Oh, you beast, you escaped criminal, you camera fiend, you photographic enlarger!"

Calvinus bowed his head at the invective, but continued to prowl. There was a sort of sunk flat at one point with protective railings. Suddenly he leaped upon these, pointing with long bony fingers at something just visible within.

"There she is," he cried; "didn't I tell you?"

Wide iron frame with gold band, woven-wire spring arrangement, hair mattress, my very counterpane, the patchwork quilt my great-aunt gave me—I forgot about that, Heaven pardon me—there she is, all—all of her! Now, what have you to say?”

“But,” remarked Little Esson cautiously, “how are you going to get the bed?”

Calvinus scratched his head for the third time.

“That is certainly a difficulty,” he said. “I don’t exactly see that we can do anything. But I proved it, didn’t I? She’s a prime A 1, first-chop bed! Look at her! Just oblige me by looking at her.”

He struck an attitude of dramatic admiration, his countenance expressive of a reasoned joy, an exalted satisfaction.

“Yonder, yonder,” he cried, “that quilt—what memories of my innocent, tender days of youth, when the nightingale and the sparrow and——”

“Blast the nightingale and the sparrow—also you!” cried Esson furiously. “D’ye mean to say you have dragged me all the way here to look at a bed in another man’s studio—locked at that—a bed we can’t get at——”

“Hair mattress—turned every morning as ever was!” pursued Calvinus mystically, “*and his father was a distiller!*”

“Look here, you A 1, first-chop ass,” hissed

Esson, "let me see what money you have, or your uncle will mourn his only nephew! I've had enough of this. Count it out!"

"Upon compulsion?" inquired Calvinus, yet more mournfully.

"Yes, on blazing compulsion," shouted Esson. He had possessed himself of a loose railing, armed with an ominous spike at the end. "Deliver up your money! This instant!"

"Well, then, I will," said Calvinus, diving into both pockets and producing an extraordinary array of coins, mostly silver. "But on your head be it." He waggled his own, feeling for a handkerchief slow to appear.

"I was getting together a little savings bank to pay for a memorial stone over the grave of my dear great-aunt, who left me the patchwork quilt in her will!" (He found the handkerchief.) "You hold the money while I weep! I would do anything—except die—for her sake. And since you threaten me with *that*—there you are—and there you are—and there you are!"

He shovelled the coins into Little Esson's hands, till they could hold no more and some began to dribble through on the green slime of the seldom-trodden footpath.

"Hold on, you fool, till I get this into my pocket," shouted Esson.

"Can't stop—if I do I shall cry—there—and there—and there! Oh, my poor dear grand-aunt! O-o-o-o-o-o-f! That's gone!"

He stood up and wiped his brow.

"There now, that's lighter! I feel ever so much better! I knew there was a weight about me somewhere to-day. I thought it was in my heart—so tender, you know—but never suspected my trouser pockets. Thanks awfully for calling my attention to the fact. Ah, my poor aunt!"

"Hutt!" said Esson with contempt, "you know very well you never *had* a grand-aunt. You don't know any of your family except your Uncle Peter, who is a grocer in Creelport, and wouldn't give you a one patch—let alone a coverlid of them. Let's get something to eat."

"What," cried Calvinus, "you slander my family. Come along to the police office! Here, police, thieves, murderers, Royal Academicians!"

And there before them stood a policeman! He had been watching.

"What's this?" he inquired, short as barking, "you come along o' me!"

And it was only on production of cards, letters, exhibition tickets of the R.A., together with copious references and some little coin of the realm, that Esson and Calvinus escaped being "lagged" for attempted burglary and the possession of money of which they could give no honest account. Esson had been seen compelling his accomplice to disgorge. And as for Calvinus McCron, it was really too much to expect him to give a consecutive account of

anything, least of all how he got his money, or what he did with it when he had it.

They took a cab. Esson felt justified in this. He had seen the glisten of several gold pieces among the hoard. There were also things that rustled pleasantly in the fingers.

"We shall go to a hotel," he said, after they had settled themselves in the cab.

"Here, let me out, cabby!" cried Calvinus, jerking his head through the window as if it were a trick mechanism. The cab stopped.

"Go on!" commanded Esson.

"Stop where you are—let me out!" shouted Calvinus.

The cabby, very crusty, came to a standstill. "P'raps you'll tell me what you want me to do when you've finished your debate—this ain't a bloomin' 'Ouse o' Commons!"

"Well, what do you want, McCron?" said Esson weakly.

"I'm going to no hotel—look at me, cabby. Have pity on me! *He* won't take me home. I'm a poor 'Orphan Boy!' Take me home—take me home——"

"What address?" said the cabman shortly, holding the door, fearing bilkers. (It is no joke being bilked halfway down from the Harrow Road.)

"*He* has the address," said Calvinus, pointing a lean finger reproachfully at Esson, "he has it—and he won't give it me—he refuses to take

me home! *You* take me home!" He tried to throw his arms round the cabman's neck.

"'Ere, 'old off, will yer?" cried that worthy, dusting his coat with his whip hand. "Now, once for hall, w'ere to? Or come out of my cab, both o' you come, payin' the legal fare, w'ich is two shilln's!"

"Oh, take him home!" said Little Esson wearily. "He is an idiot. Thirty-two, Kildare Street, and quick!"

"Bless you, cabby," said Calvinus, stretching out his hand to shake the cabman's. "With the tear in their eyes my little children will bless you—little Mary, and Tommy, and Albert Edw——"

"Oh, *dry up*!" said Little Esson with volcanic emphasis. "Drive on, cabby."

And it was so.

"Say," said Mr. Calvinus McCron, portrait painter, as they went up to his rooms, "I haven't enjoyed myself so much for a long while."

"Oh, I have," groaned Little Esson.



CHAPTER XXII.

FIRST GLIMPSES OF LADAS II.

THAT night they had supper in fine style in the studio. The bedroom was a painful subject, and to be avoided as long as possible. There was, however, the usual vague talk of a shake-down. Nevertheless, Little Esson was without confidence.

But the supper! Esson beat up the neighbourhood, while Calvinus cooked, that being one department in which his genius was both incontestable and highly appreciated, during the period when he went in and out with them of "Pitch-and-Toss."

The gas-stove did marvels, and they ate in the studio, with all the gases lighted and a fire in the chimney made of old frames.

"Good dry wood," said Calvinus, "and little use to me because the victim generally likes to provide his own—ah—*coffin*! Besides, we can make our shakedowns a bit more 'comfy' with the canvasses. I may destroy works of immeasurable value to posterity, but what is

that, so long as I provide for the present comfort of a friend. When did you come up, Esson?"

Little Esson told him how that he had only arrived that day, and that he would immediately depart, were it not that he had lost the return half of his ticket.

"I am involved in the recent bank failure," he said, "and I shall be made a bankrupt. I'll have lots of 'calls' to pay, if they catch me."

Calvinus had never heard of such things, and Little Esson patiently explained that all he possessed was for the benefit of the bank's creditors.

"'Pitch-and-Toss' will be sold up," he added, with the air of one whose paternal acres and family mansion are brought to the hammer.

"Never mind, Esson," said Calvinus, stooping over the fire in the shape of a capital O cut down the middle, "nobody will buy it."

"But the two hundred pounds for that picture," said Esson, "they will collar that!"

"Yes," agreed Calvinus; "the sheriff's officer will even now be upon your track. Better be off early to-morrow. Let's see. You fellows think I have no brains, but I'll show you!"

And he set his forefinger to his brow with such a Hamletesque expression that Esson mechanically passed him a spoutless and lidless old teapot to use as a skull. Calvinus gazed at it mesmerically.

"How much money did you say?" he mur-

mured, as if he did not wish the answer to disturb his train of thought, rather to mingle with it.

"Two hundred pounds."

"You'll never get that—Heaven knows how much you'll get," said Calvinus; "but I know a dealer and colourman who will give you fifty and take all risks—that is, if the worst comes to the worst. But we will interview that secretary fellow to-morrow morning before doing anything else."

"I should smile," said Little Esson, "fifty pounds for 'The Bloom of Their Youth!'"

"Oh, he's a decent man—the colourman," said Calvinus soothingly. "He won't mind losing on it, *for my sake*."

"By the way, how much money have I?" he added as an afterthought. Little Esson turned out his pockets on the table. It was indeed an extraordinary hoard, containing many crowns and four shilling pieces, with which Calvinus liked to play quoits on a pitch in the studio, arranged with modelling clay.

"Rather grubby," said he, regarding these, "but a wash makes them—ah—quite passable!"

"I make it £23 odd—a good deal of odd!" said Esson.

"I will see if I can't make it more," said Calvinus. And he went routing about, scratching his head, and producing sovereigns from tobacco tins, five pound notes from holes bored in the legs of chairs, and various coins from the bellows

of derelict cameras. He bowled each new discovery at Esson with a "How's that, umpire?" And continued to root about among the lumber like a terrier.

After a while he sat down.

"I must stop scratching this head of mine," he said, "or else I'll be remembering too many. That's what it is to have such a memory. I put them away like that when I have the 'dibs.' Then I forget all about them, and when I'm hard up I just scratch my head and think. It's fatiguing, and I couldn't keep it up long. I mustn't go on now. My state of health will not permit it. Besides, the next time I wanted some chink, there might be none to find, charm I never so wisely! Well, how much?"

"About seventy pounds, more or less," said Little Esson, with an air of triumph. "Why, you are a millionaire, McCron!"

"And say fifty from your picture, at least," Calvinus went on, musing upon the teapot, patting and turning it. "We will have a good, if not an imperial time."

"How so?" demanded Esson, who distrusted the mad projects of his friend.

"You must flee," Calvinus answered, "flee, or the thingums—bailiffs—sheriff's officers—will get you! No use going abroad. Too many treaties now. Haul you back in a twinkling and have you in a jacket and trousers with broad arrows all over the seat—most undecorative!"

"Well?"

"I know a man——" said Calvinus.

"You always do."

"A man who lets out vans—proper touristy ones, you know, every modern convenience. And a horse—I daresay we can find—I will charge myself with that!"

"Know another man?"

"Well, not intimately," said Calvinus; "but I know a horse. He helped me bring my furniture here."

"Your furniture!" remarked Esson scornfully; "the stove?"

"No, that's a fixture—luckily for you."

"How so?"

"Might have been sold up to pay taxes when I was away too long—most things are!"

He continued laying down the points with laborious sanity.

"That horse's name is Ladas II. Because he did not win the Derby. Yet he is a noble animal notwithstanding. The vanman knows the man who owns him. It's no use trying to purchase him, he says—that is, the vanman's friend—for money would not buy him. He is an heirloom—like my grand-aunt's patchwork quilt."

"Here," said Esson, "let's get to bed; I've had enough of you!"

"No, let's plan it first," said Calvinus McCron. "You won't, maybe, think so much of your bed after the first hour or two."

It need hardly be remarked with any luxury of detail that Calvinus wove a deliciously imaginative romance over what they were going to do. They were to paint, of course. But, and this was important, they need not pay for the materials. Calvinus knew a man who gave artists (who had a picture sold in the Academy) seven years' credit—and then, after all, took it out in kind.

"It's just the proper time," he added, "and we will go to the old Cromwell country—the Eastern Counties, you know—the flowery lanes——"

"I thought it was prettier the other way," said Little Esson, to whom nothing mattered now that Mina had forbidden him to hope.

"Prettier, perhaps, but you want a thorough change. So let's go up East, wandering on and on at our pleasure (and that of Ladas II.), stopping where *he* likes, eating the apple from the tree and the turnip out of the furrow."

"You ass," said Little Esson, "the apple blossom will still be *on* the tree and the turnips not singled!"

"I spoke metaphorically," said the mild Calvinus, without at all putting himself about, "almost anyone would have known that. We will *paint* the apple blossom, and do 'Rurals,' with figures of turnip singlers—sell them—and so eat of the produce of the apple tree and of the turnip furrow. Why should I have to explain

anything so elementary? Then you and I will dream away whole days in some deep Elizabethan glade, and think of Cromwell and all his merry men coming up with bows and spears through the forest of green Sherwood!"

Little Esson opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted.

"Now, shut up, Esson. I don't want any of your infernal historical accuracy business, leave that to the scene painter fellows, whose business it is. *You* are a New School Impressionist Idyllist; *I* a Universal Artist—all is grist that comes to my mill. What *you* want is to keep out of the hands of the bailiffs till the thing blows over. So you sneak down first thing to-morrow and get as much as you can out of that secretary fellow. If not, I'll meet you, and we will work the dealer Johnny. He'll do anything for me. I have not paid him a red cent. for ten years. So I think I have some claims on him."

"Evidently!" said Little Esson; "no doubt of that at all."

All the same the idea was most seductive, and in itself tempted Little Esson. He felt, after his parting with Mina, the usual "need of a world of men" spoken of by the poet.

To this Calvinus and his friend Ladas II. would help him.

So they went to bed—if bed it could be called—in a corner of the big empty studio.

"We will put the screen round," said McCron; "the bedroom is a place of too sad memories. That iron frame, banded with gold, upon which we gazed afar; the woven wire; those scratches on the floor! Do you know, Esson—I don't know whether I mentioned it or not—but it had *brass* castors."

And the voice of Calvinus was as the voice of one mourning for his only love.

They had the canvasses aforesaid; also some rugs and cloaks. They slept in their own proper overcoats—Esson with the seventy pounds in his inner breast-pocket, lest its owner should rise in the night, hide it, and forget where by the morning.

Esson moaned, turned, twisted, and longed in vain for the dawn. He never knew that the boards of an ordinary innocent floor could be so hard. He never suspected what a quantity of bones he had scattered about his frame.

"I believe I'm a perch, a gudgeon, or one of those fishes that are *all* bones!" he mourned. "Oh, why left I my hame?"

"To escape the sheriff's officer, and imprisonment for *meditatione fugae*, or something like that," said Calvinus. "Besides, it teaches you anatomy. That's why you fellows can't paint figures or portraits, you don't know enough anatomy. Now *I* can quite easily feel the perostyle of my lumbar extremity more pro-

minent than I had ever imagined it could be.
What does that teach you, Esson?"

"That you are a dashed lunatic," observed Esson fretfully. "I'm going to get up. It's almost light. I shall go for a walk."

"There you are," cried Calvinus; "you're a Sybarite, Esson. That's what's the matter with you. You would never have thought of going for a morning stroll to fill your soul with beauty and peace if you had been sleeping in a proper bed. But sleeping on the floor in a rug makes a fellow so blessed glad to get up. It's ennobling. That's what it is."

Then he quoted two lines from Wordsworth's lorious sonnet, "On Westminster Bridge"—

"Dear God, the very houses seem asleep,
And all that mighty heart is lying still."

Little Esson appreciated this by throwing a boot at his head.

"I wish I were, too!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE POSTMAN'S KNOCK.

NEVER morning dawned more gloriously than that which kept Mina company from Drumfern, where she changed out of the "sleeper" into the Creelpport-on-Dee local mail. All the way up the Long Wood the little apple-green engine ran straight between solemn-ranged woodlands, while overhead the tunnel, whose roof was the sky, changed to rose, the rose to orange, and the orange to pale straw-coloured wisps of fire.

When she stepped out of her third-class carriage at Creelpport, in the small, haphazard station opposite the Free Kirk, all was high blue day and a west wind blowing. The broad accents of Rob the porter sounded kindly in her ears.

"Eh, but we are a' vexed to hear o' your loss, an' the Doctor's (though I'm a Free masel'), and mair especial Miss Bee's. And I'll bring up your bits o' things on the barrow. Na, na, Miss Mina—I mean Mistress. But thank ye kindly a' the same. It's little Rob Rorrison can do for ye this day, but it will never be said

that he took siller frae ony in distress. Eh, my young leddy, but ye hae come hame to a stricken toon ! ”

“ A stricken town ! ” Indeed, Rob Rorrison spoke truly, and the description did him credit, head and heart alike.

It was striking seven as Mina went down the street. She “ cried in ” to Fleckie Itherword at her own little cottage, took off her hat, made a hasty toilette, and, refusing breakfast, she made her way through the privet hedge and the green gate to the Manse. Not for a great deal would Mina have missed being at the Manse table when the postman arrived that morning.

“ Bee ! ” she cried, catching sight of her friend digging in the garden plots, “ what in the world are you doing there at this hour ? ”

Miss Bee made a hasty dab at her face with her apron. In a moment Mina was in her arms and the spade on the ground.

“ It’s this way,” said Miss Bee, after she had kissed her friend, “ penuriously,” as Mina asserted. “ we have sent away James Houlison. The Doctor thought that in our situation we had no right to keep a man. So he and I are doing the garden and grounds ourselves. The pony is to be sold next week. There was a man came from Cairn Edward to look at him yesterday.”

And then, quite incontinently, Mina—not Miss Bee—burst out crying !

Dr. John received Mina with a quick-passing

gleam of sunlight in his eyes. His face kept its old sovereign peace, as if, for a certainty, goodness reigned continually within. Indeed, no one with eyes doubted it.

Mina found the Doctor's narrow, square shoulders a little bent. There were deeper lines and a grey, sick man's look upon his face when in repose. It animated a little in speech, but in a moment fell back again. And Mina's heart ached to see the change. There was less of difference upon Miss Bee. She bustled about the house, ran to the stables to see that Dapple had enough to eat, that he might look well when he went to be sold. She fussed about oats and watering—things concerning which she knew nothing. Since James Houlison, the minister's man, had gone, must she not do his work? Of course, it was the least she could do. Lummy Itherword scolded her, and called in Flecky to consult. A little extra work was nothing to the ex-servitor of Andro Banchory. But Miss Bee could not stay indoors. Yet she kept up wonderfully, but, manifestly, had sudden fits of crying, though, as Fleckie Itherword said, "Naebody could catch her at it."

But her eyes were, like Leah's, tender, and had lost the blithe glint which Miss Bee had kept ever since her uneventful girlhood.

James, the minister's "man," now dispensed with—James Houlison in full—lingered about the gate, forbidden to enter. They could not

afford it, said Miss Bee. "Not now, James. Please go away, James! I cannot bear the sight——"

"Sicht o' me, Miss Bee—surely never—faithful hae I servit you and the Doakter—aye, thirty year. Surely then ye can bide the sicht o' auld James. He disna ask for wages. He has a bit nest-egg laid by. He will want for naething. His cot doon by the shore-side is his ain. Let him do his bit day's darg amang the Manse plots—as he has aye done, Miss Bee! Dinna be hard wi' Jamie!"

But for that time Miss Bee had been firm, and James Houlison, like an uneasy ghost, wandered back and forth in front of the Manse gates, or with a borrowed shovel and his own mower, employed himself in making the outer approaches of the Manse, as he said, "mair faceable-like."

Miss Bee came at him "like a tiggur," as he recounted, for thus flagrantly disobeying her. She would speak to the police. But he summed up the situation thus, "Na, na, Miss Bee, the Manse and the glebe are yours, pot-herb an' flower bed. I'm never disputin' it. But I hae gotten leave frae Sandy the roadman, and this side o' the hedge, and this side o' the yett, are mine to make as feat and bonny as I like."

And in a week no manse in Scotland had such an approach—that is, till you reached the bourne guarded by Miss Bee. Then it became (as said

James Houlison, looking wistfully at the avenue curves through the spars of the gate), "like unto the Wilderness of Sin that lieth between Ezion-gebir and thon ither place I canna juist mind the name o'."

Yes, it was indeed a stricken town, and, as Dr. John said, it was not unfitting that the heaviest blow should fall on the Manse, so that the practice of thirty years' preaching might be tried, as gold in the furnace is tried, for men to see of what sort it had been.

Lummy had set the breakfast table when Mina entered with Miss Bee. Mina was crying a little still, and Lummy had "huddled" her away into the kitchen, to make her, like James Houlison's avenue, more "faceable" for the incoming of the Doctor.

After the salutation, and before breakfast, came Lummy, a different Lummy, her face composed to her Sabbath expression, her morning apron taken off, and a "dicht" given to her face.

The big Bible lay as usual before the Doctor. The "morning sacrifice" was always simple and short at the Manse—that immemorial "Taking of the Book," now almost become as a tale that is told—because of the Doctor's respect for Lummy's devotional feelings. He knew she was thinking all the while of the tea and bacon and the eggs. Still, the little service was no mere ceremony. Mina liked being there.

She used to rise earlier just for that. It helped through the weariest and hardest day.

Lummy had just seated herself, and Dr. John, noticing the working emotion upon Bee's face, had said, "We will omit the singing to-day." His hand was smoothing the broad page, preparatory to reading, when there came a sound of well-known footsteps without, never feared before. Then Lummy rose hastily and went out, her face losing at once all that Sabbath calm which it had assumed at her entrance "ben the room."

"Deevil take that Davie Loan," she muttered, "if there's an unhandy minute in the day the craitur is sure to tak' it—*rat-tattin'* in the middle o' the readin' o' the Word!"

"*RAT-TAT-TAT!*" Duly and officially fell the knocker.

"Thank ye kindly, Davie," said Lummy, who knew that it was no use quarrelling with the postman, whom she might have to ask to bring her six pennyworth o' snuff from McCron's the next time she could not get word to Flecky.

She carried in the letters. There were two or three for Miss Bee, in the pointed Italian ladies' hand taught in the boarding schools of her girlhood. These would be condolences. There was also a big, oblong, clearly directed letter for "Dr. John Broadbent, Minister of the Parish of Creelport-upon-Dee."

"That's lawviers' scribe, as I'm an honest woman," muttered Lummy, moving like a crab towards the breakfast room. "I think I'll hide it. It wad be nae sin. Foul fa' their dirty nebs and claws!"

But habit prevailed, and with an "After a', it's the wull o' Providence," Lummy laid the long, threatening-looking legal document on the table beside the big family Bible.

Mina, watching keenly, saw the greyness and the age drop over Dr. John's face like a curtain. He half reached out his hand, and then withdrew it.

His eyes went to the Book, his finger found the place.

"Let us worship God, as is our custom," he said.

And in solemn and silvery tones he began to read the mighty Fortieth of Isaiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. For she hath received of the Lord's hand, double for all her sins!"

"Double for all her sins," repeated Dr. John with emphasis, and then, as if he could read no farther, "Let us pray," he said. All knelt. There was a long silence. A strange aching hush. A waiting like what had never before happened in the Manse of Creelport. Glancing over her shoulder to be sure that the minister

had not fallen down in a faint, Mina saw Dr. John rise slowly to his feet.

"Sinful man that I am, *I cannot pray*; I am nowise fit to pray. My thoughts are carnal. They are on that letter!"

They all rose after him, awkward and ashamed, pitiful, too, for him; and the look on the face of Dr. John was as of a lost man.

"Never did I know that the flesh was so strong within me," he said, and stretched out his hand for the letter.

"I think you had better sit down, Doctor," said Mina hurriedly, aghast at the sight of his face.

Obediently he sat down, and then calmly, with his accustomed little ivory slip, he opened the lawyer's letter. His brow knit, he seemed not to understand it at the first reading. Mina trembled all over. She could feel the sweat-bells break cold on her brow. She was conscious that her lips were white. She bit them so that they should not bear witness against her.

"What is it, John?" said Miss Bee. "Go out, Lummy."

"Lummy wull not!" muttered Lummy defiantly between her teeth. "If we hae a' to gang beggin', Lummy will carry the poke."

And she lingered about the breakfast room door.

"Take it, Bee," said the Doctor. "I think—I fear, I do not read aright."

Then Miss Bee, adjusting her glasses with a trembling hand, read :

"To the REVEREND JOHN BROADBENT, D.D.

"REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,—We have the pleasure of informing you that your name has been inserted on the list of stockholders of the — Bank (presently insolvent) by some oversight. The necessary certificates remain in our hands, as also the money value of the shares at the date of your instructions of the 15th ultimo. To wit, Seven Thousand Pounds (£7,000) on your own account, and Three Thousand Four Hundred Pounds (£3,400) on behalf of Miss Beatrice Broadbent. In the fortunate circumstances, you will not be liable for any 'calls' whatsoever, and if any papers connected with the matter are sent to your address, be good enough to forward them to us, that we may deal with them on behalf of our client.

"Venturing to congratulate you on the satisfactory termination of a matter which must have caused you some unavoidable anxiety,

"We are, Reverend and Dear Sir,

"Your obedient servants,

"MACNOAH, STARK, AND STARK,

"W. S."

There was silence about that untouched breakfast table, a silence which lasted very long.

But they did not doubt—why should they ?

"I can't pray yet, but I can sing !" cried the

Doctor suddenly. And rising in his place, with that majestic presence associated with Sacramental Sabbath days, he gave out the ancient doxology—

“ Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”

* * * * *

But nobody sang very much except himself. Not even Lummy, though she was again present. She had come in, so she said, because she happened to be polishing up the keyhole of the breakfast parlour! But as they sang they sobbed together, these three women, and it was all very good.



CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRICKEN TOWN.

THERE was heaviness upon Creelport, though it showed but little, as is the Scottish wont. A certain steadfast acceptance of misfortune, very worthy, even dignified, was the chief keynote. A widow sat alone, all her children at school, wondering, as she mended the little stockings, what she would do to bring his children up. Her all was gone. Her husband had invested it for her with care. The merchant was at his books, they would have to go before the Receiver in Bankruptcy. There was nothing else for it. Meantime, he must get the halfpence to balance !

A farmer came driving in, and went the round of the banks in Creelport. He had money in the shut bank which he could not touch. His landlord was pursuing him. They reassured him, but for the present he must get along as best he could—his landlord also.

Sad days—a stricken town, even as it was a stricken country.

But somehow, from the known joy of the

Manse, other joys began to radiate. There was from the first something mysterious about it. Creelport and Drumfern were like the two women grinding at the mill. Creelport was left, but her sister town was taken.

Messrs. Comline and Sons, preparing their papers, were informed by a local bank agent, instructed by a London legal firm, that enough money would be put at their disposal to pay twenty shillings in the pound. In the meantime their creditors were permitted to refer to the said local manager of what was the strongest bank in Scotland. Messrs. Comline and Sons could repay the loan upon terms dictated by excessive amicability.

Mrs. Patullo, the doctor's widow, found that her shares had been dealt with in the same fashion as those of Dr. John and Miss Bee. Curiously enough her broker also, without consulting her, appeared to have changed her shares for those of the Bank of Scotland. The Creelport agent of that concern reaffirmed this. He had a list, and ought to have known.

Almost daily there was someone on whom, like a shaft of sunlight through breaking clouds, happiness seemed to fall out of the darkest dark.

Only two remained with nothing done for them, no drop of the bitterness spilled out of their cups. One was Little Esson, concerning whom there was a rumour that he had fled the country, and that an officer of the law had been

seen viewing "Pitch-and-Toss." This last was true. But it was Little Esson's friend Constable Vinnie, who took it upon him once or twice in his nightly beat, flashing a lantern in at the windows, and seeing the tall easels stand up like scaffolding and a lay figure with one arm held stiffly out, all that remained of Little Esson's dress suit flung over one elbow and the only tall hat in the community stuck on the back of her head.

"It gied me a proper turn the first time I saw the thing, standing like that wi' the lightning flashing in on it ower my shoother!"

Mina mourned over Little Esson. She met various members of the colony as they appeared and disappeared. For it was the hottest season of exhibitions, and only those who had homes and studios could be found in Creelport at that time of year. First of all she encountered Martin Frobisher, more flourishing than ever, swinging his cane, and with the lines of his trousers in striking contrast to those affected by Little Esson, who, however, was again the better painter. It went a good deal by trousers in Creelport. Little Esson's were the most disgraceful.

"You have been in Edinburgh, I presume, Mrs. Fairweather," said Frobisher airily, "did you run across Hunter?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Mina, sweetly interrogative.

"Hunter Mayne, I mean."

"I did not even know he had left Creelport. Have you been away, too?"

"I am on my way down to Broom Lodge," he said, with a certain show of feeling. "They are in sad trouble there. I hear that you have been fortunate enough to get rid of your shares. Your name was not even on the first list."

He saluted and went off, swinging his cane a little less airily.

Mina took her way along the old Town Meadows. The hawthorn was again in bloom. The grass and the May flowers and the sweet violets in the hedges gave a good smell. The birds sang their bravest. She remembered the old time when she had listened to Hunter Mayne there—yes, yonder to an exactitude was where he had been painting.

"Oh, what a fool I was! And what a fool I *am*—to send away poor Archie Esson. And he came all that way to help me, and he had not a penny—not a penny. What if——"

Terrible possibilities of death by starvation took possession of her brain. Her mind for the next half-mile was a mere panorama of horrors, all happening by her fault, to Little Esson. Her fault—of course it was hers—all her horrid temper! Oh, if he only would come back, would write to her, show any sign of life.

But no; she herself had sent him away, knowing that he had no money, that he might never get the money. But here a reasonable

thought came to her. She could at least find *that* out. And taking a short cut—the Town Meadows are all short cuts—she found herself at the post office door.

She wired to Messrs Huth and Bernstein to know if the money for "The Bloom of Their Youth" had been paid.

And she waited till the reply came back within the hour—

"Money paid to artist next morning, we hold his receipt.—Huth and Bernstein."

As Mina turned to go out a veiled lady, in whom she recognised Terry's aunt, Lady Titus Grainger, passed hastily in. She could see that her face was flour white, even through the crape. Neither spoke. Mina passed with her eyes down-cast. Hilda was at the door waiting for her mother. She turned her back ostentatiously on her cousin's widow as she passed.

But Mina knew that her time was now come to try of what sort she was. She put to herself the query—what would Dr. John have done for Lady Grainger if he had been in her place? She could not forget that, in spite of all, it was that woman's house which had received her when she had not a home to go to. Also she was Terry's aunt and sole relative—except, that is, the "Green Girl."

So Mina went directly home and wrote another letter, directing certain transfers of stock to be

announced to Lady Titus Grainger, Broom Lodge, Creelport-on-Dee, N.B.

"Terry would have wished it," she said. "And even giving away all this—and suppose I never get a penny back, as Mr. Stark says I may—I shall be far too rich anyway. I cannot be happier than with Fleckie on sixty pounds a year."

She sighed. For she could, faintly and distantly, but still distinctly, imagine a brighter life with the dearest, the freshest, and sweetest-natured man in the world—always excepting, of course, Terry.

She added the last clause with a kind of jolt. She had almost forgotten. And she must not forget. For it was Terry's money that was enabling her to do all this. It was Terry, who, being dead, was speaking to Creelport.



CHAPTER XXV.

THE "GREEN GIRL" SAYS GOOD-NIGHT.

MINA sat alone in the twilight, looking out of her open window at the blackbirds searching for belated worms on the little table-cloth of lawn. She had been in seeing Bee, rejoicing in the power which money gives of making people happy, and in her heart lauding Terry's foresight. But all the while she yearned for news of the "Prodigal"—her "Boy" to whom she ought to have spoken like a mother, instead of sending him away unhappy like that. She could never forgive herself—never! She felt that there was growing up within her a great power to speak to Archie Esson—like a mother. And after what she had heard of the housekeeping at "Pitch-and-Toss," she was perfectly certain that he had stood greatly in need of being so talked to.

Suddenly a "Tap-tap," fine, but firm, came to the door. Mina's heart leaped. Could it be? Oh, if it only were?

But instead the "Green Girl" stood on the threshold.

"I wish to speak with you," she said, and, without waiting for an invitation to enter, she passed Mina and turned into the little parlour. There was something so strange about Hilda Grainger's manner that Mina, for the first time in her life, wished that Fleckie would hurry back from her marketing.

The "Green Girl" did not sit down on entering the little parlour, where were Terry's portrait and Mina's simple household gods. Her face seemed more pinched than ever, with its close-cropped covert of tawny hair. The eyes, seen in the dusk, were mere green fire. Hilda Grainger wore an old cloth walking-skirt, with a side pocket, and out of this she pulled a lawyer's letter, the counterpart of that which had been laid some mornings before by Dr. John's plate.

The "Green Girl" bowed to Mina as a man might have done, but sneeringly and disdainfully. She could scarce articulate her words because of the tearing desire to wound her hearer by every one of them.

"My Lady Bountiful," she began, "so we are going about doing good by stealth, with money that ought to be another's—with my money—mine—mine—I ought to have married Terry—I was his nearest heir—till you came—*ah-h!*"

The guttural was like the snarl of a wild beast checked in its spring.

"How do I know? Look, dear 'Baa-Lamb,'

do I not know the firm of Terry's lawyers? It was they who reported to the Widow Patullo. They are backing old Papa Comline and his cub in the drapery and outfitting line. I dare say it was they—Stark, MacNoah, and Stark—I have not forgotten the names—who have acted a '*Keeind Providence*' to the worthy folk up at the Manse! And my Lady Bountiful did it all—all—*with my money!*'"

At her first coming Mina had been taken aback, and only now regained enough self-control to invite Miss Grainger to be seated, and to say what her business was.

The "Green Girl" laughed unpleasantly. With women she did everything unpleasantly.

"I don't look particularly melodramatic, do I?" she said, putting one hand on the table with the fingers and the thumb very far apart, like a professor posing a demonstration, "too insignificant—Becky Sharpish, without the beauty or the wit? But—*dangerous?*'"

Mina kept perfectly quiet. She began to think her mad.

"Has it ever struck you, 'Baa-Lamb,' " the "Green Girl" continued, her hand again in her skirt pocket, "where your money—Terry's money—would go to, if by chance you were to die? No, keep looking at me, 'Baa-Lamb,' please!"

And the green shine of her eyes grew fixed and mesmeric. There seemed to be nothing

else in that dusky place except only those eyes. Mina felt them growing bigger and bigger, and she herself diminishing and diminishing, till her will and power of action seemed as nothing. Yet she was quite aware of the necessity of keeping herself in hand.

"Say what you have to say and go!" she cried, the words sounding strange and hollow in her own ears. In spite of herself she sat down.

There was something now in the hand of the "Green Girl." It was shaped like a pencil, and shone like a long needle of silver.

"Yes, look at it, 'Baa-Lamb,'" said the "Green Girl," "this is Nirvana. So swift, so sure—none will ever suspect. I have spent my life in hating you, 'Baa-Lamb.' Why? Well, first I hated you because you were '*pretty*'—'*pretty!*'" she repeated the word bitterly. "Men made love to you. To me only one or two talked a little, like throwing scraps to a dog. Then Terry married you. I showed him letters of yours which I myself had written—he did not care a hang, he said, true or untrue, and so flung away from me. I wrote letters to Terry as if from dear old Jeanne, who had been married ten years. But neither would you believe. Such a united household! Touching! Look at me, 'Baa-Lamb!' I am looking at you!"

Mina kept still—she could not help it now.

"Now, listen. I am going to prick you with the point of this little German syringe. Presently you will die—die, 'Baa-Lamb,' without pain—happily! Nirvana, 'Baa-Lamb!' That's it, and then I shall heir your money."

The "Green Girl" took a step or two nearer to her victim—her head seemed to carry before it two green orbs, blurred, luminous, and terrible—nearer—nearer——! •

Mina was under the influence of the place, and impressed by the scene. She felt no terror, but clearly she was succumbing. Something seemed to hold her incapable of movement, as in the nightmare when the "Thing" approaches to seize.

The outer door opened.

"Are you there, Mina?" broke in, as from another world, the frank, kindly voice of Miss Bee. The rustle of her silken skirts awoke Mina. In an instant she had sprung from her chair and grasped the "Green Girl." The tube of silver and glass fell. Mina's heel trod it into fragments, and her hands were on the wrists of Hilda Grainger. Physically, of course, the "Green Girl" was no match for Mina.

She forced her into a chair in which she had been sitting and held her there.

"Mina," repeated Miss Bee without, "are you there? May I come in?"

"If you do not let me go I will tell her all," whispered Hilda Grainger, "then her brother



"The 'Green Girl' took a step or two nearer to her victim."
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will refuse the money. Let go. Let me go, I say. I shall never trouble you again. I have played and lost. I always knew it. You need not fear me again."

"I do not now," said Mina.

* * * * *

When Miss Bee entered, Mina was standing by the window and the "Green Girl" was sitting in the larger easy chair. Both were very quiet.

"Ah," cried Miss Bee, with that fine open honesty which sees nothing that is not meant to be seen, "so you two have made it up! At last! I am so glad. And I hear that your dear mother has been fortunate enough to get out of her shares, Miss Hilda!"

Everyone who was unfortunate became at once by that very fact either "dear" or "poor" to the good Bee.

"Oh, my mother," said Hilda Grainger; "she is indeed fortunate—in her daughter."

"But about the bank. We were so sorry——"

"So was I," said the "Green Girl."

"But now it is all right, isn't it?" continued Bee, in spite of her curt answers. "Mr. Dempster was just telling my brother—the banker, you know. Perhaps it will not be quite arranged yet; but it is all right."

"*It will be to-morrow morning!*" said the "Green Girl." "I bid you good-night, Miss Bee, and—you—Mrs.—Terence—Fairweather!"

* * * * *

"How stiff she is," said Miss Bee, "calling you all that, and you her first cousin's widow! But, after all, it's good you two have made it up, isn't it? There's Fleckie in the kitchen, I heard her key turn in the back-door lock. It ought to be seen to—oiled, I mean. I came to speak to her about the washing to-morrow."

But they did not fully understand what the "Green Girl" meant till they read a paragraph in the second edition of the local paper, *The Creelport Express and Mercury*.

MELANCHOLY CATASTROPHE IN CREELPORT HIGH LIFE.

"Early on Tuesday morning one of our best known and most universally respected residents, Lady Titus Grainger, of Broom Lodge, having found her daughter's bedroom untenanted and the bed as it had been left early on Monday morning by Amelia Brown, housemaid at Broom Lodge, penetrated into the workroom and laboratory of Miss Hilda Grainger. To her horror and surprise she found that some accident had happened there, probably in testing the strengths of certain chemical poisons. Miss Grainger was lying on the floor, and to her great grief the unfortunate young lady never regained consciousness. She appears, in fact, as the doctors affirm, to have been dead for many hours. Miss Grainger was a distinguished pupil of the Basingstoke Physical Research Institute,

and it is feared that her well-known scientific zeal has led to her untimely end. The deepest sympathy is felt for her unfortunate and sorely tried mother, Lady Grainger, who is suffering from nervous shock, and to whom the news that she is not personally implicated in the recent disastrous bank failure affords, as yet, but an imperfect consolation. *No flowers, by request.*”



CHAPTER XXVI.

TRAVELS TO ESCAPE THE SHERIFF'S OFFICER.

It was their first hot day and leafy glade, besides which Ladas II. was beginning to reveal his characteristics. So they rested—Ladas II., Little Esson, and Calvinus McCron. The former retained the heather-mixture suit appropriate to the semi-civilisation of old "Pitch-and-Toss." But Calvinus was weird in a smock, a carter's whip, and a poet's hair.

"It is for Ladas's sake," he explained when observations were made. "I don't want him to feel strange. He has not come quite on the footing of an ordinary horse, you see——"

"No," said Little Esson, with great dryness, "ordinary horses walk on four feet instead of three."

"Well, you can't expect *everything*!" explained Calvinus, "even if you did nail that two hundred from the secretary of the Royal. He must have been a soft! He will hear about it, I bet. It must have been left for some other fellow's picture."

"Don't repeat yourself, Calvinus," said Little Esson.

"The terruth is never stale, save to those who have reason to fear it," said Calvinus, wagging his wise head and solemn jaws.

"It's scarce, though, with you about!" returned Esson. "Oh, no, there was no trouble at all with the secretary fellow. It was just 'My name is Esson, Archibald Esson; there's my card.' 'How d'ye do, Mr. Esson. Your picture is a great success. I saw you, I believe, on varnishing day. Your countryman of our Academy, Mr. Peter McTavish, introduced us. We are glad to see the younger Scotch fellows coming about us again. I have an envelope here for you. Please count the money, and sign the receipt. The buyers? Oh, Huth and Bernstein, picture dealers. I judge you have a good thing there, Mr.—ah—Esson. We shall see you again, I doubt not. Good-morning, Mr. Esson.' And I've got the leaflets in my pocket."

Then a thought seemed to strike him.

"I say, what if we are robbed, McCron?" whispered Little Esson. "We are carrying far too much money, you know."

"Can't help that," said Calvinus; "it was to save it that we came away." Then he scratched his head. "I've got it," he cried. "Nobody would suspect Ladas—Ladas II., to be precise and to make the distinction clear."

"What's got in at the crack now?" demanded Esson, carefully feeling his travelling companion's head.

Of this Calvinus took no notice, serenely pursuing his madcap humour, under cover of the grave reasonableness which distinguished it.

"I said, and truly, that Ladas was no ordinary horse, and, in spite of your sneers, I am prepared to maintain it. True, he walks on three legs occasionally. But, then, it is not every horse that can do that! Did you never hear, in your crass ignorance, that the finest breed of Dandy Dinmonts always runs on three legs. It is the same with horses. By so doing Ladas shows his breed, and, besides, he doesn't always run on the *same* three legs. He only holds one up to give it a rest. That shows brain, mind, the constructive intellect. Not every horse could do that! I defy even you, with all your boasted education, to do as much, and yet you speak of 'the lower animals.' It makes me furious—I am disgusted—Civilisation—'the Long Result of Time'—Freedom slowly broadening down, from precedent to precedent. Yet neither you nor I can run on three legs as Ladas there can, and never puts on the least side about it either! Pshaw, I'd rather be a dog and bay the moon than try to put sense into some fellows' heads."

"See here," interrupted Esson, trying to lead Calvinus back to plainer paths (no easy task once he got started), "tell us about how you

got him. He is indeed a noble ruin—quite in the landscape way! Especially good for foregrounds by moonlight.”

“Don’t mix things,” Calvinus continued sagely. “I’ve been trying to reduce you to habits of mental order for a long time. The money and what to do with it. That is, I believe, the question before the house. Them as mean ‘No’ say ‘Aye.’ The ‘Ayes’ have it!”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Little Esson eagerly, “let’s settle that.”

“Well,” pursued Calvinus, “it’s like this. Ladas II. has always to wear blinkers—night *and* day. His private physician has ordered it for his health’s sake. He is—I don’t know if I mentioned it—doing this trip with us for his health’s sake, and he condescends, for the same reason, to drag our van.”

“At intervals,” put in Little Esson.

“Well,” said Calvinus, coolly regarding him, “*you* are a criminal fleeing from justice; my character—well, we will say no more about that. But poor, sick, despised Ladas is honest, laborious, honourable. He never got drunk. He never voted. He has never told a lie. Oh, Esson, think of that, dream of that! We will slip the two hundred in notes into the inner lining of his blinkers. They are special blinkers, you know, made at a famous optician’s in Bond Street. I don’t know if I mentioned before that Ladas is wall-eyed on one side, and threatened with

cataract on the other. So, of course, the friends to whom he is dear wish to give him every care, every luxury. They have spared no expense on his outfit. They have consulted the most famous professors of——”

“Oh, dry up!” shouted Esson; “you get on my nerves. But for once there may be something in what you say. Certainly no one would steal Ladas, or his harness—not even if they found them on a rubbish heap!”

With this project in their minds, they went out and examined Ladas, who stood in the shade investigating the contents of a nose-bag.

“Looking at him from all points of the compass,” said Calvinus.

“Yes, I admit that he reveals new beauties every moment,” agreed Little Esson.

“I knew you would come to see it in time,” cried Calvinus, with enthusiasm in his voice, which, however, refused to communicate itself to his solemn face.

“Yes,” said Esson, “that great head, bowed a little as if weary with its burden!”

“Brains, brains, my boy!” said Calvinus. “You’ll never be troubled in that way, Archibald Esson. What a comfort to your family!”

“But,” objected Esson, “why does he stand so high on his forelegs? They must be at least a foot longer than the rear articles. He is more like a big dog sitting down.”

“He often *is* like that,” said Calvinus. “He

washes his face with his forepaws and purrs! Do you doubt my word?"

"*Doubt!* Certainly not!" retorted Little Esson promptly.

"'Tis well," said Calvinus. "We will now examine the blinkers. But cautiously. I will throw my coat over Ladas's head till we have stowed away our ill-gotten gains. That's the proper thing to do, you know. Hist, that sounded like a policeman!"

It was only a ploughman going whistling to his work, who asked for a fill of tobacco. After he had puffed himself duly out of sight, Little Esson much improved the optician-made blinkers by stitching all round them with a curved needle from a little surgical case. When he had finished the two hundred pounds paid by Mina for "The Bloom of Their Youth" were also encased. During all this time Calvinus had not ceased to monologue. His subject was the symmetry and perfection of Ladas II.

"His master is a large coach owner in a northern suburb," said Calvinus, "but, of all his animals, and he possesses them in herds—like those old patriarch fellows—his heart has only really been given to Ladas II. So when he learned from my friend, the owner of this commodious travelling van, or rather palace upon wheels, that we were going for a trip through the flowery lanes of England, he offered us Ladas as our companion, not as our chattel. He bade

me remember the fact, in words, whose tenderness I shall never forget: 'My Beautiful, my Bounding,' he said; 'my Barbary steed!'"

"Rubbish!" said Esson. "Don't tell me that a North Kensington coach hirer ever talked like that."

"Well," said Calvinus, "I can't help it. It's being in Ladas's society that does it. You see, 'I lisp in rhymes and prattle in charades,' as the poet said."

"As the ass brayed," growled Esson. "Finish what you have got to say, and let's get on."

"I am reducing the moving tale to its simplest form to suit your intellect," said Calvinus, with the air of a patient teacher. "I'll try words of one syllable if you like. Let's see. So the Horse La-das was lent to us du-ring the trip, that his health and spir-its might be re-stor-éd. We have him with-out pay-ing for him. But he is to be treat-éd just like one of our-sel-ves. It is so no-mi-na-ted in the bond."

"Stop it, you jackass!" said Esson. "Are we not to pay for him? And what happens if he dies?"

"His master is a friend of the vanman, who is my friend," said Calvinus, dropping the childish staccato. "He has ransacked the entire faculty to find a cure for that horse's trouble. It is suspected to be a kind of equine neurasthenia."

"He certainly looks neurotic," said Esson. "He has just eaten a shirt and part of a blanket off the hedge of that cottage garden!"

"It is one of the worst symptoms," said Calvinus sadly; "but let us hasten. For the owners of these articles may come after us and require us to make him disgorge."

They climbed on the van, and Ladas II., having satisfied his appetite for household stuffs, actually did a sort of "Peter-Dick-Pot-Stick" "hirple," or disabled canter, down the little hill. They were somewhere near Dunmow. Ladas seemed to have what he had eaten still on his conscience. He frequently stopped to think. On these occasions only the extreme adaptability of the harness and attachments enabled him to strike his favourite attitude of a mastiff baying the moon. Luckily there was a special brake on the van, attached to the axle, which was capable of holding it even on a steep incline.

This was many times the saving of our travellers.

At first they used to get out and adjure Ladas. Little Esson with what he conceived to be a carter's vocabulary, and afterwards with the whip, and even stones from the nearest road-side pile.

All was in vain. Ladas sat on the stump of his tail, and, with flowing mane thrown back like a poetaster of the late Eighties, he remained

indifferent, wrapped in meditation, careless of flint or thong.

Calvinus tried another way. He recalled to Ladas II. the great deeds of his ancestors, his own unspotted record, till now unbeaten!

"Because he has never been known to run," interrupted Esson.

On these occasions Calvinus camped in front of him and talked. It was never any difficulty to Calvinus to talk. The difficulty was all the other way. He pointed out that night was the season proper for repose of the body and meditation of the spirit. They were far from water, shelter, food, the ordinary comforts of bran-mash. All this and much else he would pour forth by the hour, till Ladas's nose, at first haughty and unsympathetic, would gradually droop into the hand of the speaker, and the one remaining equine eye look into the dark, sad ones of Calvinus.

Perhaps there was something akin in these two natures, the man's and the beast's. Esson, at all events, used to think so. Calvinus, solemn, wise, humorous, madder in his moments than any hare of March, *bizarre* in the unexpected leaps and twists of his reasoning, shy and *farouche* in spite of all his solemn nonsense. Ladas, like to nothing of the horse kind which had previously come from the Creator's hand—perhaps the horse aboriginal—tameless, never sulky, never wilful, but armed with a power of "ganging his ain gait," which no mortal need

strive against. These two finished by understanding each other.

They had long colloquies, Ladas with his head in the knitted palms of his friend, and Calvinus monologuing in his easy, untroubled voice.

Sometimes Little Esson would go into the caravan and try to get some sleep when the expedition was thus in *panne*. And, on coming out, Calvinus had always something new to tell his friend.

"I believe," he said one day, "that he is either the reincarnation of Buddha come down to start afresh, or something quite new in the Egyptian line—Apis, Isis, or—Semiramis——!"

"Rats," said Esson, "Semiramis was a queen, I tell you. One of the R.A.'s did a big 'Historical' of her. I saw it. It was not bad."

"Look at him!" said Calvinus, neglecting the R.A. in question. "I tell you, if Ladas had been in Egypt in those old days they would have worshipped him."

"I thought," said Little Esson, "that they mostly stuck to cats and dogs."

"Well," affirmed Calvinus, "I have reason to believe that Ladas is both! He purrs, doesn't he, like a cat? Like a dog, he 'hunts in dreams.' That's when he kicks his stable door down, as he did last night. There you are—horse to the eye; cat to the ear; dog? you just watch him smell his oats! And, withal, worth more, with those blessed blinkers on, than any human we have set eyes on to-day.

What an animal! He's an enchanted prince, I tell you! He could talk if he wanted to."

The affection of Ladas for the long, lanky humorist, Past Master of Smileless Idiocy, was at times a little inconvenient. He would follow Calvinus about like a dog, affection beaming from the one eye fit for active service. If they paused on some village green and tied up Ladas, as they thought securely, to the village pump, he would either sit there, a grief-stricken sentinel, exhibiting to every intruder a nobly preserved set of teeth, extending (as it seemed) far back into the abyss of things. No women or children would draw a bucket of water, and no man, after a single glimpse, would dare to disengage the fastening.

They knew too well the dangers of horse-bite. Besides, a horse that sat down in harness like a dog! There is still talk of witches in the East Lands. Wise folk there know that they take strange forms sometimes. There was old Gammer Edlin down at Wrigglesby, she had a black dog that—ah, but he were nothing to this here horse, if indeed horse it were.

Ladas had often a good audience, but there was no performance for half an hour, Calvinus having whispered in his ear that he would be no longer away than that. Ladas watched the village clock. If there were none, he knew the time just as well. But if the ale was good and they lingered longer, he would appear, as he had done once at Little Hambledon, casually

dragging the van behind him, the village pump rattling about his neck, and striving with all his might to enter the bar parlour, where his friend Calvinus was sitting at meat.

The matter culminated, however, at the village of French Drove in the Fen Country, where, one Sunday, our two travellers being decently in church, Ladas II. appeared in the open doorway (it was a hot Sunday) in the very middle of the Litany. There he camped on his haunches, his head projecting past the pew of a Member of Parliament, who was in the act of stating, quite correctly, that he was a miserable sinner. Then all were sure that Ladas was the devil indeed.

He had broken bounds. He had interrupted a regular service in a parish church by law established, and the scandal was so great that Esson and Calvinus had to harness up immediately and quit the vicinity with all possible speed.

"Poor people, they are mistaken," mourned Calvinus. "If they would only have let me speak there in church, I could have proved it to them. Ladas is *not* the devil. He is only sad and wistful, one of those silent souls afflicted with eternal aphasia——"

"Is that another disease?" demanded Esson. "I thought he had them *all* already?"

"You do not understand him, I do," said Calvinus McCron with a sigh.

A remark which had, perhaps, more of truth in it than appears on the surface.



CHAPTER XXVII.

CLEAR MORNING AND CLEAR NIGHT.

ONE morning Mina, who had inspired so many letters arriving of late at Creelpport, received one on her own account. It was dated from Los Diablos, Cal., U.S. of America, and was to an altogether unexpected effect :—

“MY DEAR SISTER,”—so it ran—“I am the bearer of a message of grace which may soften even your hard heart. Our father, ere he died, forgave you everything, even the act which rankled longest, that of turning him like a beggar from your door. He wished me to say that he has changed his mind about the old Hilliard house, and, as he took no legal steps to carry out his first design, that house is yours. For me, I shall never return. I could not go back to the must and rust of Sleepy Hollow. I have found my vocation. Oh, if only you would likewise throw off your selfishness and absorption in the world, we would welcome you as a recruit to our bright band. The Silver

Trumpeteer goes on from victory to victory. I may add that my own humble efforts—on the blackboard, and with coloured crayons—have also been much blessed. We are now starting for our third tour of the States. The full season for camp meetings will soon be upon us, and at the favourite health resorts our campaign has been planned on a *monstre* scale. Our tent at Asbury Park will seat eight thousand souls, besides an organ, brass band, and two lime-light apparatuses with expert operators. I need send no messages to the companions of my years of shame. They are, I doubt not, only sinking more deeply in the mire than ever. But if you see Archibald Esson you can tell him that once I had some hopes of a better spirit in him. Bid him not extinguish the rushlight, however faintly it may burn.

“Any contribution to our work which you may feel inclined to send as a thank-offering will be accepted by

“Your brother,

“JEROME HILLIARD.

“(LIGHTNING SKETCHER. SPECIALITY: ‘THE PRODIGAL SON,’ IN 7 TABLEAUX IN 7 MINUTES ON AN ORDINARY BLACKBOARD!)”

The signature and final professional information had been impressed on the paper with a rubber stamp. The letter was typewritten.

Mina lay back, and, shutting her eyes, thought

long. Her father was dead. She could not truly say that she felt sorrow of any kind. She owed him nothing, save life. She had honoured him as well as she could, till by his own act he had driven her from him. She received the news with an absence of feeling, which astonished herself at first, till she began to realise that Claude Hilliard himself had killed, little by little, all daughterly feeling in her heart.

And her brother? She drew a long breath. That, at least, was well. Beneath the self-sufficiency, the blatant assurance, the narrow egotism, the intolerance of his school, Mina read, and read correctly, a manlier, nobler instinct. She could see Jerome Hilliard, drunk, shouting at her along the streets, till her very cheeks tingled with the shame. She knew also, for Miss Bee had told her, all that Little Esson had done for her brother. This was another man—no doubt with a barbarous conception of the needs of human souls, but still with a hunger after them. And if men and women are attracted by such methods, it shows that there is need of Simon Broolie and of his acolyte Jerome Hilliard, the Lightning Sketcher.

Upon the moment she sat down and wrote an affectionate letter, enclosing a cheque for fifty pounds, though it was evident that Jerome was in no personal need. He asked only for the mission and not for himself, she noted with pleasure.

Then she went up to her chamber and shut the door. I do not think she wept. Perhaps, though not of the Church Catholic and Roman, she said a little prayer for the dead, which at least did the dead no harm. Then she came down again, very peaceful, with a black dress on. She opened the green gate and said to Miss Bee, with a kind of austere quiet, "My father is dead. I am glad—he died forgiving me. It is best so!"

Concerning her brother she uttered nothing at this time, nor did Miss Bee ask. Bee had loathed Claude Hilliard in life, and was far too straightforward to pretend to regret him now he was dead.

"Ah," she said, taking Mina's hand gently, but not kissing her, "let us go and tell Brother John."

The Doctor had found such an improvement in his health during the short time he had spent out of doors, trying to do James Houlison's work, and (as that worthy man now averred) "drivin' the gairden to wrack an' ruin," that he still continued to assist, in spite of the frenzied entreaties of James to Miss Bee: "For God's sake, do get the maister indoors, or there willna be a carrot or a syboe worth eatin' in the gairden this year!" So they found him banished among the flower plots, which were only James Houlison's second-best love.

He heard the news with his usual calm.

"Once he was a good lad—yes, of parts and promise," he said. "Claude Hilliard had a bright morning. His noon and afternoon were overcast, but if what we hear be true—and there seems no reason to doubt it—the clouds cleared before nightfall. In sending forgiveness to you who had no need of it, perhaps unconsciously he asked it for himself, who had much."

Dr. John raised his hand slightly, with that fine gracious gesture of his, not high up, but just slightly from the wrist.

"The light shall not be clear nor dark," he said.

Then he paused a little and his lips moved, doubtless continuing the quotation, but all that the daughter heard was only the final phrase, which she afterwards graved on Claude Hilliard's tomb in the family burying place :

"At evening time it shall be light."



CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE APOTHEOSIS OF LADAS.

CREELPORT-ON-DEE was five hundred years old on the 23rd of June, its charter of incorporation bearing that date. Creelport, some little recovered from the terrible days of the bank failure, and desirous of forgetting them altogether, had long resolved to distinguish itself above all the boroughs, royal or otherwise, of the southland.

Its provost, Mr. Jeelypiece, de-converted by getting his long-desired "license to retail," and now using Amen Hall as convenient temporary cellarage, was provost with all the honours. He had made his peace with the churches, though not with Dr. John. He had grown so rich and rotund that the burgesses felt they could no longer refuse him the highest municipal office. He had tried hard to get a royal personage to come and lay the foundations of the new stone bridge, across the Creel estuary, which was to be the crown of his civic labours. "Sir John" Jeelypiece would not sound bad at all. And then think of what the Cairn Edward folk would

say, and even far Drumfern—poor, proud, worthless bodies that they were!

No least royalty was, however, disponible: Creelport was somewhat too small, it seemed. It could not be that royalties were too scarce. Creelport, therefore, had to fall back on its local talent. They had a duke in the neighbourhood, who lived in great seclusion, but still a genuine duke with many castles and alliances almost royal. He promised to be present if the gout would allow him. There was the Lord Lieutenant of the county, of course a belted earl, various sirs and honourables, some a little behind-hand with their payments to the local butcher and baker, but all thinking themselves only a little lower than the angels, and whose names at least would make a brave show in the local paper. Then there were peppery colonels and half-pay majors—poor, brave men of war for the most part, whom the privilege of defending their country had noways enriched. Mr. John Jeelpiece actually proposed to the Town Council of Creelport that these gentlemen should only be invited to the procession, ceremony, and banquet on condition, clearly understood beforehand, that they should wear their uniforms.

Mr. Jeelpiece had an eye for the picturesque. Also all the councillors were to have a new gown apiece out of the "Common Good." The funds for the bridge had been in large part

collected, and it was hoped that the public would respond liberally on the eventful day.

The Duke of Creels was not a rich man, but he made up for it by immense length of lineage and a personal dignity yet more appalling. He even talked of the sacred Stuarts as "in the female line." Like Creelport, he dated back to the Bruces. In fact, after a friendly glass or two of an evening in his own black oak panelled dining-room, he would give you to understand that, though Bannockburn was a much overrated affair, the original Robert (present on that occasion) had not been at all a bad sort of a fellow.

Little differently from other mornings dawned over Creelport the morning of the 23rd of June. Mina had lain awake nearly all night, wondering what had become of Archie Esson. She did not call him "Little" Esson any more. It seemed, as it were, unworthy of him, and of the anxiety of her feelings. Not that she loved him—no such thing. Of course not. Quite absurd! But then she might have sent him, with careless thoughtlessness, to his death.

True, that receipt forwarded by the Secretary of the Royal Academy to Messrs. Huth and Bernstein, and signed with the name of A. Esson, was certainly a comfort. People don't go and receive payment of two hundred pounds before vaulting Westminster Bridge.

But, all the same, where *was* he? Why did

he not write to her? She had, it is true, forbidden him to do anything of the kind. but what of that? If she had been a man—well, she knew what she would have done.

And all the time the Pole Star rising higher little by little each evening, along the northerly highways, then steadying as they turned westward towards Creelpport and the setting sun, the lost trio came nearer to its goal—that is to say, Ladas, Calvinus, and Little Esson.

Little Esson would stand it no longer. He was resolved to be noble! No longer would he flee from justice. He had spent a good deal of the two hundred pounds, and the bank people could take the rest. He would not, he could not, lead this hunted life!

“Eh, what!” cried Calvinus; “‘*hunted?*’ Man alive, do not I, with that inner sense which you lack, but which is common to Ladas and myself, see through you, insensate knave? It is not to render yourself up a martyr to the justice of the fiduciary laws of your country—no, it’s because you can’t keep away any longer from the lass. Well, fond fool, go to your fate! But remember, *I* have warned you! Leave Ladas and myself to peregrinate the lonely ways of life, equally free from the deceitfulness of riches and from that of faymales! Ah, Ladas! Ladas! what I have long prophesied has come to pass! He is forsaking us, Ladas. Yet enough, Esson. It is written, no man can escape

his destiny. But in the meanwhile, come outside and watch me teach Ladas to give a paw! He does it now twice out of every three times of asking."

And, indeed, the solemn, lantern-jawed Calvinus had taught Ladas as solemnly to pose his forefoot in the palm of his hand, while, as usual, he held himself camped upon his tail in a green, gipsying dell, through which a stream of water ran.

* * * * *

It was a day acceptable, a high festal day in Creelport—that of its Quincentenary. The big word looked bigger on the immense notices (nine-sheet posters) scattered abroad over the land by the care of John Jeelypiece, Esq., J P., Provost of the aforesaid Royal Borough, and Convener of the Celebration Committee.

Many of the worthy citizens did not know what "Quincentenary" meant—some even connected it with the bitter-tasting stuff the doctors give you in the spring. They were informed, however. Because the headmasters of all the public schools were instructed by the Board to instruct their pupils on the history of the ancient borough, who, in their turn, instructed their parents. "And," muttered Antiquary Jamie, thumbing his manuscripts, "not one of the dollop knows anything about it—not enough to choke a cat."

There were special trains at reduced fares, and cheap excursions. 'Buses and brakes ran

from the villages still without railway accommodation. And every gig, cart, and waggonette for miles around was requisitioned. It was to be a great day, even unto solemnity.

Eight bands massed and six pipers—these last Highland waifs and strays, but as interesting to the Lowlanders as a travelling menagerie. There were to be six companies of volunteers—a whole battalion indeed—expenses paid by Mr. John Jeelypiece as a thank-offering for his wine and spirit licence. The County Militia were in camp near by, and as the Duke was their honorary colonel, they would be there, too, and the great man would ride at their head. They had never seen him before.

Then came the fire brigade and the fire brigade's new helmets. The Creelpport Brigade had only gone to one fire, and, as there was no water, had to come home as they went, merely losing the hose by the way. So they had manifestly worked for their brand-new helmets, which winked satisfactorily in the sun. The Freemasons moved gravely with linked fingers. The Oddfellows defied the world in oddity of sashes, followed by the Free Foresters, gay Robin Hoods who had never seen the merry greenwood in their lives. But all were easily eclipsed by the Free Gardeners. These last, accustomed to "walk" in procession once a year, carried floral emblems and had their flag poles done about with ropes of roses.

Never was such a sight seen in Creelport. The great platform on the hilltop in front of the Castle ruins—the home of the Duke's forefathers—had been constructed with an easy ascent at the back, a kind of inclined plane, in consideration of the Duke's inability to mount a step without intense suffering. He had made that stipulation when arranging for his distinguished presence with the Provost. If he had asked for a model of Noah's Ark or the Tower of Babel, he would have got them.

And what flags, and awnings, and banners, and Members of Parliament, what loyal and patriotic speeches! Creelport felt the pulse of Empire beat.

For the populace, there were greased poles and legs of mutton, a programme of foot races, and sack races, and one-leg races, and three-legged races. Also there was an emblematic fountain outside the Provost's Stores (late Amen Hall) which ran red wine so long as the "big wigs" remained astonished before it. After that it came down to very small ale indeed. And even that was not continuous. For whatever was not immediately caught as it escaped from the spigot fell into a trough beneath, and was forthwith reconducted again within the Jeelypiece cellarage.

Jock Butter, once caretaker of Amen Hall, now head cellarman, watched carefully in his master's interests, and when any citizen appeared

who, in his opinion did not deserve that the fountain should flow for him, he informed him of the fact in the plainest manner.

"Get awa', Pate Tamson," he would cry, "I wonder at your face—ye voted again the Provost last election!" Or, as it might be, "Davie Dirlton, that's the third tankard ye hae had filled—free, gratis, and for naething! Ye'll get nae mair here this day!"

And the fountain dried up instanter.

Davie and Pate communed with the unseen arbiter, but Jock Butter refused to be entreated of them. Whereupon their voices changed to railing. "When are we comin' to the yill?" they cried. "This is but dish-water; I could mak' better o't wi' my guid-wife's Monday suds!"

"And *wine*!" cried Davie, through the bars of the wicket, "that Duke-body made a desperate sour face when he tasted it. I heard yin o' them say—a cornel he was—that they wad need a bit line before they could tak' that for claret wine. An' he swore blue murder that it had never been nearer to France than the vinegar bottle and the pump!"

Thus are the best gifts of the good and great rejected and they themselves contemned! "Alas, alas! for poor humanity," as said Calvinus McCron when he heard about it.

It was nearly two o'clock when the procession, advertised to start at one, began to take its way, music breathing warlike from the column's head.



"Little Esson took off his hat as if he had suddenly found himself in church."

Little Esson.)

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Behind came the Provost and Bailies, with their gold chains of office ; then the red-robed Councillors. The Duke, all in scarlet and gold, came riding at the head of his gallant militiamen. What came after that does not affect us greatly, save that the guilds of the burgh went by in massive ranks of four abreast. One figure, whom we love, moved alone before the Sunday School teachers and pupils of all denominations. The people on the sidewalks cheered the good grey head of Dr. John, whom not even the eloquence of Miss Bee could persuade to wear his red Doctorial robe. His brother clergymen, who respected him, followed each with his own flock of teachers and children.

For Dr. John loved not processioning, and silyly glanced at his watch to see how long it would be before he would be back in the quiet of the Manse garden. But, being women, Mina and Miss Bee rejoiced to see the minister so beloved.

Now into the wide Main Street along which the Quincentennial celebration was marching, with tread measured and slow, the road from Drumfern debouched at right angles. And along that road, while the procession was being marshalled, and while John Jeelypiece was perspiring almost as much as the intermittent fountain at Amen Hall, another procession was advancing—Little Esson, Calvinus, and Ladas, on their way to deliver the first-named, by his own desire, to the justice of his offended country.

"Music?" cried Calvinus. "Regard Ladas, that honourable steed! See how he pricks his ears. I feel sure he was once in a cavalry regiment—the Scots Greys, I believe! Ah, the old war horse!"

"Bah!" said Little Esson, anxiously regarding the dint in the green trees on the northern outskirts, where nestled the Manse and the cottage of Mina, "don't talk rubbish at such a time. Ladas could only get into the camel corps—look at his neck!"

They passed along the deserted streets which led into the main processional highway. A black hedge of people filled the mouth.

"You can't pass here; the procession is coming!" So they shouted to Calvinus, who was driving. But Calvinus knew better. He was acquainted with Ladas. The good and patient animal bore but ill the opposition and contradiction of men. He opened his mouth, and the black hedge of burgesses melted away, Urchins cheered, and, lo! as if into a new world Ladas turned into the Main Street of Creelport, a hundred yards in front of the great Quincentennial procession.

"God save the Queen," was being blared from eight brass bands, and performed with variations by six pipers, all blowing against one another, puffing cheeks and wagging rumps. Ladas had never seen anything like it. A policeman approached to lead him aside.

"Take *me*, if you like," cried Calvinus, his voice mounting to a shriek, "but touch Ladas—at your peril! *He is going . . . to sit down!*"

Ladas turned, and without troubling himself about the powers which were or might be, he seated himself on his haunches, with his long forelegs erect, and snuffed with wide nostrils at the approaching pipers. It almost seemed as if the Quincentennial would have to be stopped before it had well begun.

Suddenly, however, Ladas II., having satisfied himself that this was something really worthy of him, got up, pivoted the van and his body on two legs, and took the head of the procession, limping proudly on three.

At Drumfern an accident had happened to his blinkers, and now only the one with the balance of the banknotes remained *in situ*. The wall-eye, white as a peeled egg and about as large, glared out on the appalled multitudes.

Little Esson had judiciously fallen behind. He was now going up the sidepath as fast as he could make his way through the crowd.

"Come on," he had said to Calvinus, "let him go wherever he likes. Nobody will know that he belongs to us!"

"Traitor! Coward! Dastard!" cried Calvinus, with a wave of superb contempt, "*you* would desert Ladas in the hour of his need! For me, Calvinus McCron, I never will. I swear it!"

But a couple of policemen, though they could not succeed in stopping Ladas in this his apotheosis (he snacked his teeth at them), induced Calvinus to come down and stay behind decently among the common throng. But they had too much to do, so presently that faithful humorist found himself loose and making his way up the hill towards the platform. He could see, beyond the noble form of the Duke on horse-back, beyond the scarlet-clad councillors, Ladas striding ahead on three legs, his head high, and that disreputable, unwashed North Kilburn van, which had travelled so many hundreds of miles, lumbering and swerving behind, its rear door swagging open, and part of the rotten rope harness trailing in the dust. He could see, above all, the ears of Ladas proudly erect, his rat-like tail, and the slant of his back steep as the roof of a house!

"Heaven's sweet mercy!" muttered Calvinus, "if only he does not take it into his head to sit down again, we may do yet!"

At the front of the platform Ladas was puzzled for a moment, but only for a moment. He endeavoured to take advantage of his long fore-legs to mount it, but only succeeded in snapping the last rope fastenings that held him to the van. This, recoiling like a big twelve-inch gun, scattered the massed band and Corporation.

Then, a free Ladas, he soon found the inclined plane and mounted, first on deck of all the Quincentennial procession.

But I must really let Calvinus tell the rest of the tale, cutting his narrative only in the more Calvinian passages—which is a pity.

“Esson was before me,” he said, “but he had met with—ah—friends, so he did not see all that I saw, which served him right, for he never loved Ladas as I have loved him. He let that girl find him, and so he never saw the finest sight in the world. Talk of your sunrises from the top of Mount Blanc! Talk of the wine-hearted Greek sea, and mighty thunders of Niagara. But give me Ladas, camped on that platform, amid waving banners and all the panoply of war, sitting serenely on his tail and giving a paw to Colonel the Right Honourable the Duke of Creels! I pass. You can have the rest. That’s good enough for me!”

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What Calvinus reported so succinctly was true. Mina and Miss Bee had been standing together waiting for Dr. John. They were looking out for him, when suddenly Mina gave a sharp little cry: “Oh, Bee, there he is!”

And the next instant she had Little Esson by the arm; or he had her in his. No one seems quite sure which, or cares. But Dr. John, who turned aside on sight of the group, lifted his hands. “Bless you,” he said. “I always knew it would end so!”

But Miss Bee hustled them down a side street as fast as possible.

"For shame," she said; "and before all the folk! It is a blessing that all Creelport was in the procession, so that only the country folk could see you!" But Mina and Esson did not care a jot. She kept his arm very tight as they passed through the deserted streets and green by-lanes, Mansewards.

"You shall not get away like that again," she said.

"But I must go to prison," said Esson, mournfully. "I detained money that ought to have been given up to the creditors of the bank——"

"What bank?" queried Mina sharply.

"Why, the bank that broke, you know," stammered Esson. "They send the people who 'conceal effects' to prison. I read it in a notice—those very words!"

Mina laughed till she cried, then cried till she laughed.

"*Why, you were only a depositor!*"

"Well, and don't they send them to prison, too?" said Esson simply.

She took his arm again, her hand farther in this time.

"Come along," she said, not minding Bee, who went on ahead, "if ever any one man needed someone to look after him, you are that man. *And I am going to do it!*"

* * * * *

Calvinus appeared the next day. His air was melancholy, as usual, yet there was brightness

in his sky also. He had seen the "Beatification of Ladas." Also he had bought him.

"Well, did he cost you his weight in gold, as you always said?" asked Little Esson. They sat in the garden, with Mina leaning over the seat.

"No," Calvinus hesitated; "the fact is, I—I had a letter from his owner this morning to say that he would accept three pounds for him. You will have to pay it out of your private hoards. Here is the blinker!"

Next day Calvinus bade them farewell. He and Ladas were taking once more to the open road. There was nothing so good, it seemed. Six miles a day till we die," said Calvinus; "and when my money is done I can paint portraits, or write to you for a loan. Good-bye, old Esson. I am glad you are happy, but you will never really understand Ladas!"

They watched the rickety concern climb the little brae out of the town hollow. At the top, Calvinus, who had been walking alongside, waved his hat to them, leaped up, took the reins, and drove forth into the Unknown. Perhaps some day he will re-emerge; but where, when, and how, is still mystery.

* * * *

During the honeymoon old "Pitch-and-Toss" had been carefully done up by Fuzzy Wells, John Glencairn, and the Barnetson Brothers. Mina and her husband walked down to it from

their little cottage in the lee of the Manse. They had wisely decided to make no change for the present, except building a bedroom or so, now that the property was their own. Miss Bee had been through the green gate at least ten times that morning, and they had waved a friendly salute to Dr. John, as he paced up and down the Long Walk, his hands behind his back, meditating his next Sabbath morning's sermon.

The "boys" were all off sketching, and so Mina, wishful to see the old place "just with Archie alone"—not Little Esson to her any more—demanded the key from Fleckie. They strolled down the shore road to the weather-beaten, ramshackle, tarry, tumble-down building. Here, once on a time, her hour had come upon her.

They stood a little while in silence. Mina looking at the spot where she had stood. Her heart was full. But she was happy, of which the best proof was that she never thought of Hunter Mayne at all.

Instead she laid her hand on her husband's shoulder and said, softly, "Do you know, I think Terry would be glad if he knew!"

And then, for some reason or other, Little Esson took off his hat as if he had suddenly found himself in church.

THE END.



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